Comic Fandom Quarterly

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Fanning the Flames of Fandom for Future Fans!

MATT WAGNER

Plus:

Two Decades of Comic Book Movies

Part Five of A Five Part Series

What a time it is to be a comics fan!

What a time it is to be a comics fan! Comic book movies are finally having their day in the sun. After years, decades even, of infrequent output and questionable quality, comic book movies have finally reached critical mass.

The unprecedented output and quality of comic based movies is finally delivering on the promise of what all comic fans have long believed: comic books would make great movies. Times sure have changed, and the attitude towards comic books as cheap entertainment devoid of merit has morphed into a greater understanding of comics as a true American art form. What was once considered kids stuff and later nerd/geek culture has taken over mainstream movies as the go-to tentpole blockbuster movie of the 21st century.

The quantity and quality of comic book movies has grown by leaps and bounds in the last 20 years, since the first Blade and X-Men movies came out, and shows no signs of slowing down. Finally, there is dedication from movie studios to loosen the corporate reigns a bit and allow knowledgeable and skilled creators the room to craft some fantastic and exciting movies based on classic comic book characters and stories.

In this concluding article, we take a look at the recent Superman movies and also turn our attention to a bit of supposition and speculation about certain upcoming movies and the trend in general toward comic books becoming top-line, A-list major movie events.

It's a good time to be a fan of comics!

-Robin Dale

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Coming Soon
CFQ #6 - All Fanzine Issue!
CFQ #7 - Comic Book TV Shows Part 1!
CFQ #8 - Comic Book TV Shows Part 2!
CFQ #9 - Comic Book TV Shows Part 3!

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Robin Dale: We're here with Matt Wager, Matt thanks for joining us.

Matt Wagner: My pleasure.

RD: So you've had a really long and illustrious career, and you started out with Comico in the independent market.

MW: Comic was originally made up of some fellows I met in art school. Just by sheer happenstance I was on the elevator one day and one of them had a, I think it was creation conventions, which was the main East Coast Convention purveyor of the time, and struck up a conversation with them, and so and so and so.

RD: So you were practically one of the founders.

MW: Yeah although I made I think the good decision not to be involved in it on the business end of things. I wanted to concentrate on being a creator. So when we first started out in fact, I was kind of the office bitch for a while. I answered mail, I did Xeroxes, I did all the office stuff that needed to be done.

RD: Let's set the way back machine then and go back to how you got started with everything.

MW: I've always been very motivated by stories. I grew up in kind of the traditional Protestant family, so I like to describe it as I grew up with an active mythology. Stories were a big part of my life. My mother was an English teacher before she had me. We lived kind of far out in Amish country, I was an only child. Stories were things that entertained me when I didn't have playmates which was pretty often. In fact, getting back to that active mythology bit, one day knocking on our door came, I kid you not, a door to door Bible salesman who was selling lavishly illustrated leather bound Bibles. While showing these to my parents, and we're flipping through the illustrations, and I'm naming them all off like "There's Daniel and the Lion's Den! There's Moses! There's Noah!" etcetera, etcetera. We get to a picture of Adam and Eve in the garden with their lion cloths and I said "Dad! Tarzan!" (Laughter) So I think I was kinda doomed for this from the very beginning.

Matt in 2008

I also drew to entertain myself in those days, and I gravitated towards comic books because comics were writing stories and drawing all in one neat little package. My mom never complained, unlike a lot of English teachers of her generation, that I was reading comic books. She thought I'd grow out of them, and she provided a very liberal dose of Classics Illustrated, which at that point were always point of purchase items at the checkout at the grocery store. So we'd be checking out at the grocery store and she'd pick me up Macbeth, or Romeo and Juliet, or David Copperfield, or etc, etc. Which is how I got my initial exposure to all that great literature through Classics Illustrated.

My parents have a school memories book, one of the scrapbook sort of deals, pre-printed scrapbooks, and on the back of all the grade school years it has a spot for "What I want to be when I grow up," and one year I wrote astronaut, and I have to assume that's the first year they first landed on the moon, and every other year I wrote comic book writer. I wrote "comic book writer" because I think I just naturally assumed that whoever drew the stories must write them too right?

RD: Which has been true at one time.

MW: Had been true - well, only briefly really. I mean even from the earliest days of comic books - the comic strips yes - but comic books from the very beginning were a production house for the most part. I mean even Siegel and Schuster were a pair, and of course to meet the heavy demands in those early days, they very quickly set up production studios with assistants, and letterers, etc.

RD: Eisner/Iger was a well known one.

MW: Exactly but even Siegel/Schuster had one when Superman first took off, they had a production studio very similar.

RD: Bob Kane with all his assistants.

MW: Bob Kane as well, you know it's hard to tell what the hell Bob Kane did in those days, how much early Batman stuff is actually him or not. So, you know, it's very strange then that I would have written "comic book writer" just assuming that whoever drew them wrote them, and I grew up to become a writer/artist, I do both. Fitting bit of irony there.

RD: Yes and it looks like you really followed your path right down to it.

MW: Oh absolutely. I was one of those lucky few that got to do what they wanted to do ever since they were a little tiny kid you know? Not many get to go and join the circus! I joined the comic book circus!

RD: (Laughter) You hear that a lot from other creators, and particularly ones who are lucky enough to be writer/artists or have that kind of overall control of the product.

MW: I think part of that too is the result of the fact that the comic book field, out of all the entertainment fields, is fairly accessible you know? It wasn't so much until we started having conventions, but once that cropped up and once comic book stores started cropping up, there was access to not only your favorite stories, and the more obscure versions of your favorite stories, the more obscure issues of your favorite stories, but also then, if you go to conventions you have access to your favorite creators. What other, I mean, you can't go somewhere and meet your favorite TV star very readily, you can't go meet your favorite rock star very readily, you can't go meet your favorite movie star very readily. You can walk in to a convention and walk right up to - you might have to wait in line for a little while - but right up to your favorite creators and shake their hand and say hello and I think that provides an accessibility that people find very welcoming and very much inspiring, you know? They think "I could do this. I could be part of this scene" and I think that's a great thing.

RD: Oh yeah and you also have a unique aspect of comic books in that theoretically, and more so than in other industries, you could actually do the entire product yourself.

MW: Absolutely, absolutely. And that has a great subversive quality to it as well. There's a documentary done a number of years ago where they interviewed Sue Coe who is a very politically active kind of punk cartoonist. And she was pointing out that, that's one of the powers of comic books, that you can't really broadcast television by yourself, you can't really make a movie by yourself, or you can't screen it very well. You can make a comic book by yourself. You can Xerox it off on a home Xerox or a home printer, and you can hand it out on the streets. That has a real guerilla quality to it in that regard that I think is very powerful too.

And truthfully, I think you get the best results out of the smallest amount of creative input. I understand you can get wonderful results out of the production machine that the big two operate. But generally the most interesting are the ones where you have one or two guys steering the boat, and a very distinct vision from their collective imaginations.

MATT WAGNER

"Creators are stars. I made MAGE's creator

VITAL STATISTICS

comics 40 Interview

WRITER/ARTIST

and main character the same person."

MATT WAGNER

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Comics Interview #14

RD: And a strong vision from the imagination is something you're very well known for with your stories.

MW: Yeah I've never really had trouble generating stories. I remember when I first met my father in law for the first time he said to me, "Ah, artist huh? Aren't you ever scared you're gonna run out of ideas?" (Laughs) And I said "No" because as long as I'm alive I'm taking in new information and so there's new stories to be told.

RD: That's right. And you have a creative process of how you bring that out, and the types of stories you tell. It seems to have resonated with a lot of people.

MW: For me, the narrative of a story is the window dressing to describe an emotional reality. And I think that's why my stories connect with people, because really what I'm aiming for is an emotional reality, a connection, a resonance that goes beyond the sheer actions of the story itself. The sheer action of the story itself is how you dress it up to make it entertaining and make it engaging, but the way you make it memorable is to try and tap into this common human experience, so that somebody can read your stories and say "Yeah, I felt like that. I know that!" That's the way I felt about that. Or oppositely I don't feel that way about that at all, that's another reaction that's actually genuine as well, but you have to put the story out there to get either of those reactions.

The way you effect, of the way I effect, that sort of emotional quality is to draw from aspects of my own life. You know, most peculiarly you see that in Mage, because obviously the main character looks like me, and in fact in the second Mage series I incorporated far more characters from my real life into the story line. But the same is true of the first storyline, the supporting characters are much more

amalgamations of several different people into a common character, whereas in the second storyline it's very distinctly 'this character is this person from my life.' And in fact that had a lot to do with my decision to do *Mage*.

Mage

One of the first things I had ever tried to develop for publication was a story about the return of King Arthur. It was much more traditional in every sense. It was set in a Holocaust future, it had a very kind of SciFi/fantasy trapping to it, the main character wore a costume and a cape, and a little headband that kind of echoed a crown. I will say I was in no way shape or form ready or capable to approach such a story, but you know your dreams are big and your hopes are high and you aim for your reach to exceed your grasp a little bit. So I started to develop this, I had done two pages of finished art, and then DC announced that they were going to do this book called *Camelot 3000*, and I thought "well OK, to hell with that then" you know, they've done it.

Mage #4

RD: And they did it in that way too!

MW: Well, and let's face it, that guy Brian Bolland draws a little bit better than I do!

RD: He's a pretty good artist I hear!

MW: (Laughter) So I completely shelved it, and then it came out and I just thought it was flat and boring as dry toast. Beautiful look at, nothing about it spoke to me in any sort of that emotional resonance that I was discussing earlier. And so I thought, you know, the way to reinterpret a myth in a modern day is not to just transplant it, but to personalize it, to give it a personal stamp. So I finally realized, you know if this myth means something to me, I should be in the myth. So I decided I was going to go ahead and attempt my own retelling of the return of King Arthur. I was down at - I used to live in Philadelphia at that point - and I was down at the waterfront one day just doing some sketches, and one was a sketch of myself, a self-portrait, and another was of a kind of raggedy Harlequin-y street person. And those two characters became Kevin and Mirth in *Mage*, because they struck me as having, again, a resonance the spoke beyond the immediacy of the drawing, they were a evocative, you wanted to know a little about both of those characters.

That to my mind that's how you keep myths alive and vital, you know. If you read the work of Joseph Campbell he points out that all myths are exactly the same, they're just reinterpreted for each new age of man via the, basically via the technology of the time, the scope of our understanding of the scientific world informs how we express the ineffable ethereal qualities, spiritual qualities, that we find in our myths. Because our myths describe what we can't say in science. You know people used to always ask him (Campbell) do you believe in God? He said God's a metaphor for everything that we can't understand about the oneness of the universe, and that word, that metaphor, is God.

And so for *Mage* with me it was bringing it down to the level an existence that I understood at that time, which was a bunch of guys and t-shirts and jeans running around the city streets. To my mind, that's where King Arthur came back, the same way that - I'm not a practicing Christian - but in Christian belief, you know, if Jesus ever comes back I don't think it's going to be like the *Left Behind* novels where he returns as this giant, almost pro-wrestler sort of look on a giant steed, you know, he's going to come back as the same ordinary guy he was to begin with, and there again that makes it part of a common human experience. I think that's where and how my stories resonate with readers so much, because it is as you mentioned earlier, yeah, my readers really feel a connection to my stories, they feel a personal kinship to it. I couldn't ask for a better response than that.

I'm just choosy about when and how I do it. I've never gone chasing after the brass ring in that regard, you know, I really follow my muse, which is why Muse is taking me so long to complete. I've completed the first two of the three parts of the trilogy -

RD: Yeah, Matt, and we're waiting!

MW: (Laughter) It's mainly because the time isn't right, you know? Especially with *Mage*, it's something where Mage almost has to decide when I'm going to work on *Mage*. Because when I work on *Mage* there's room for nothing else. Everything else I work on I can kind of work on two or three projects at the same time, but *Mage* has to be all or nothing.

RD: Yeah because it's so much a part of you, from you.

MW: Yep. yep. The focus is all pointed back at me. In fact that's another metaphor I use: *Mage* is me looking inward, *Grendel* is me looking outward.

RD: You started out wanting to be a comic writer, assuming that they did both, so did that just follow through where you just did the writing and the art as you went on, and that's just where you went into it, or did you ever like write and then pick up drawing later, or vice versa?

MW: When I first entered the field I had always, and to this day, I don't separate the two actions of writing and drawing very much. To my mind they're both just storytelling. I guess it's a little easier for me to write for other people, for other artists, than it is for me to draw other people's writing. In fact in my lengthy career I've only worked with a handful of other writers, and worked with buckets of other artists. They're usually writers that they were all good writers, so I

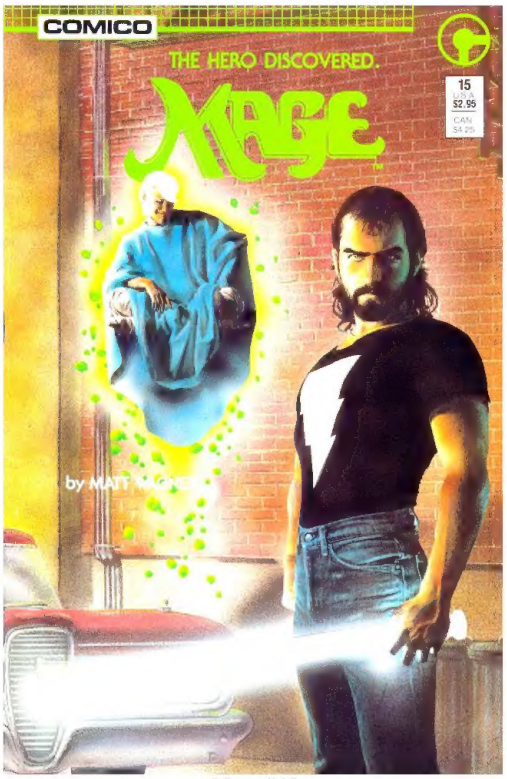
worked Neil Gaiman once, Kevin Smith once, James Robinson, Brian Bendis, and Greg Rucka. I think that might be it. So all those very talented writers, all of them just a notch different than myself, and in fact you know the reason that I see to work with other creators is to expand my boundaries and have a truly collaborative experience.

That's expressed even in the fact that when I'm working with other artists, and I'm writing for other artists, I work in plot and dialogue fashion, which used to be called the Marvel Method and Marvel doesn't work that way anymore! I write a plot instead of a what's know as a full script, and a full script is somebody is not familiar with that, looks very much like a movie screenplay where every scene is spelled out exactly what happens. The writer can often describe the layout of the page, how many panels they want, how they want the panels to be stacked and interacting. And then of course all the dialogue and word balloons and captions are already written into the script. I write a plot, I'll describe on each page the action of what happens, I might have a vague layout idea, but generally not. I want the artists, I want it to be truly collaborative, I want the artist to bring something to the table. I feel it's kind of a moral thing. I draw as well and if I wanted that sort of iron-clad control, I would just draw it.

So I write a plot page by page spelling out what happens, I'll throw in some lines of dialogue as flavor, then I let the artist go, and inevitably when it comes back to me it's not quite the way I pictured it when I was picturing it in my head because that was my way of looking at it. And that's great, that's exactly what I'm looking for, to be able to look through somebody else's eyes a little bit. Then it comes back to me as the pencils, and then that makes it even more invigorating in my outlook on it because seeing these characters and these situations that were abstract ideas brought to physical fruition will suggest to me details that I didn't think of, or character traits, or syntax, or slang, or speech methods, all sorts of things.

So it keeps it fresh. I even take this through in my own work when I'm drawing. I don't work with what the industry terms "full pencils," my pencils if you looked at them would be considered layouts, and probably even sloppy layouts by most people, certainly by most commercial editors, because I don't want to just be tracing over the pencils in the ink, I want the ink stage to be just as lively as the pencil stage was. So I want to be drawing a bit in the ink in the same way I was drawing in the pencils.
It's all about keeping it fun and intriguing. I mean I'm constantly looking for new ways to interact with other artists, I'm constantly looking for new ways to propel my self into different methods of producing my own work. When I find myself becoming somewhat repetitive I tend to take a break. Like for instance I just finished a big long stint of drawing stories: the *Trinity* series from DC, and follow that up with two *Batman* mini series that were six issues each, and I follow that up with a new *Grendel* mini series as well, it's quite a lot of drawn pages. I felt like you know I'll sit back now and I'll write for other artists and I'll absorb and interact with their visual outlooks and hopefully that will turn me in a new direction and I'll approach my own visual representations in a slightly different fashion.

I think my art is constantly evolving, I mean it constantly looks like me, it's not like you look at it and think, you know, he picked up a new style. No, it's not really the case, but I always try and let the story dictate what the art wants. For instance, in the two *Batman/Grendel* crossovers that we did, the first one is very much Batman meets the first Grendel, Hunter Rose, and it's very much a psychological thriller, it's very much a giant puzzle that Hunter Rose has posed for Batman, and it's very character driven. It's very much a portrait of those two men, their secret identities and these two women they interact with over the course of the story, and as a result it's a very dense sort of layout. It's a puzzle that gradually opens up as the puzzle opens up.



Mage #15

The sequel was Batman confronting Grendel Prime, who's a Grendel character from the future, he's a marauding powerful cyborg, and so exactly the opposite. I opened that up and made the panels bleed off the page a lot, overlap over each other a lot. The point of that story was action, I wanted to be a roller coaster ride, and I even pushed that into how I approach the rendering on those two stories. The first one, lot blacks, lots of dry brush effects, lots of kind of crime noir sorts of visuals. The second one, lots of jagged lines and speed lines and delineations of muscles, and a very active sort of visual style. So I think my art is constantly evolving because I'm constantly evolving. The it stops becoming fun like that is the day I'll quit but I don't forsee that anytime soon.

RD: No, no. So when did you start painting? You know I'm sure you started painting before you actually got stuff published or whatever, but how did that come about and how do you decide to pick that up?

MW: I went to college for a couple years at a liberal arts university in Virginia, and I was an art major so I had kind of traditional art training, and that included three dimensional design, two dimensional design, photography, painting, drawing, anatomy and then I transferred to an art school which is where I met the guys that ultimately formed the first publishers I worked with. That too was fairly traditional art training. I've always painted. I always just try to get better. I think in recent years it's gotten better, it's gotten more clarity. I've always had a pretty good sense of color and I think my sense of color has become particularly strong in recent years. I'm more subtle with my colors than I used to be, the color is more of a psychological power than I used to have that sneaks up on you rather than hit you over the head with a blunt instrument. I also like to play with limiting my color.

The latest *Grendel* series we did was in black, white and red, so I had two shades of grey and a flat red to use, and really tried to push that to my advantage in regards to storytelling and drama and moments, not just use the red as a missing color, you know it's there to pump the story and direct attention and the shock. So painting has always been fun for me, you know, here again I don't really think of it in those sort of different terms. It just happened to be rendering in paint now as opposed to ink you know? There just not two different beasts for me.

RD: It sounds like with your creative process, you look at the whole.

MW: Oh I very much look at the whole, I very much treat everything like a sketch-to-finish sort of process and I even treat the stories that way. But it's constantly taking a little bit of this and adding a little bit of that, and me plucking away a little bit of this and put a little bit of that in. I think I've always had a very strong design sense and that plays into my stories as well, my stories are very much design pieces. They have a very peculiar structure, a particular structure. For instance in *Trinity*, the series I did for DC just a few years ago, and it involved their three big flagship characters - Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman - and as a result we had three big oversized issues, because three big characters, three big issues. I really wanted to stress how much each of these characters was so identified with their location, their locale, their home base. So each of the issues started off with a full page splash. First issue Metropolis, second issue Gotham City, third issue Paradise Island. So I've always had a sense of structure to my stories, and I think that applying a design sense to my writing, which I think is a strength. Certainly you can get too wrapped up in that to where, again, stuff wouldn't resonate, but I don't sacrifice the emotional realities for the structure. The structure has to support the emotional realities, that's the most important part.

Grendel: Black White & Red #4

I'm very much instinctual about my writing, even though I apply this design sense to it, it almost has this innate spiritual quality to it where I'm just going for the emotions, I'm just tracking down the emotions to their logical conclusion. I know a lot of writers have a kind of almost a mathematical equation for how they approach this stuff. You know I hate math. (Laughter) I far prefer for the Arts and the Arts is all about feeling.

RD: I always look at it and I say, "Well OK here's how you tell a normal straight up story of this type" you know, you do this, this, this. So now how can I take that normal kind of structure or storytelling and turn it sideways a bit? What can I do different with it that would be interesting to me, and serve the story and serve the characters, in a way we haven't seen before? Would that be a fair kind of way of looking at it?

MW: I mean you're constantly looking for some way to put your individual stamp on. You know there's this old adage that every story has already been told. I hate that description because it's belittling. It's belittling of the common human experience that every story is trying to express. We react to certain things and certain archetypes in certain ways because these images are hardwired into our brain capacity and our way of thinking and expressing ourselves. So yeah every story has been told. You know what? Hasn't been told by me, hasn't told by you, or you, or you. And that is the thrill of what makes it new and exciting every time. The human race is a certain constant and yet it constantly reinvents itself. Certainly the life we're living right now in many ways, with our cars, our computers, our space ships, our high tech medicine, is utterly alien and different to the life an ancient Egyptian led. On another level, it's exactly the damned same you know? Those people get up in the morning just like we get up in the morning, they're hungry the same way we're hungry, they get horny the same way we get horny, they fear death the same way we fear death. All that is what makes stories eternal and what makes them fresh and new at the same time.

In addition to sitting around and thinking about the stories I'm going to tell, I sit down and think about the stories themselves and think about the act of storytelling. Again I don't really have a structure or a planned out way of telling stories, but I do look at the stories I've told and try and figure out what makes them work, what doesn't make them work. Like for instance I mentioned earlier the work of Joseph Campbell who of course was the first to describe the stages of the classic hero's journey. I had never read any Campbell when I did the first *Mage* series, which is the epitome of the hero's journey as he was describing it. And in fact when I finally read his most famous book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* he describes the first stage of the Hero's Journey, and it's like creating a plot-by-plot breakdown of *Mage*! The call to adventure, the refusal of the call, supernatural aid, the long night, into the belly of the whale. That's the first *Mage* altogether! I remember reading that in the book and just sitting back and going "Woah! Got that one right."

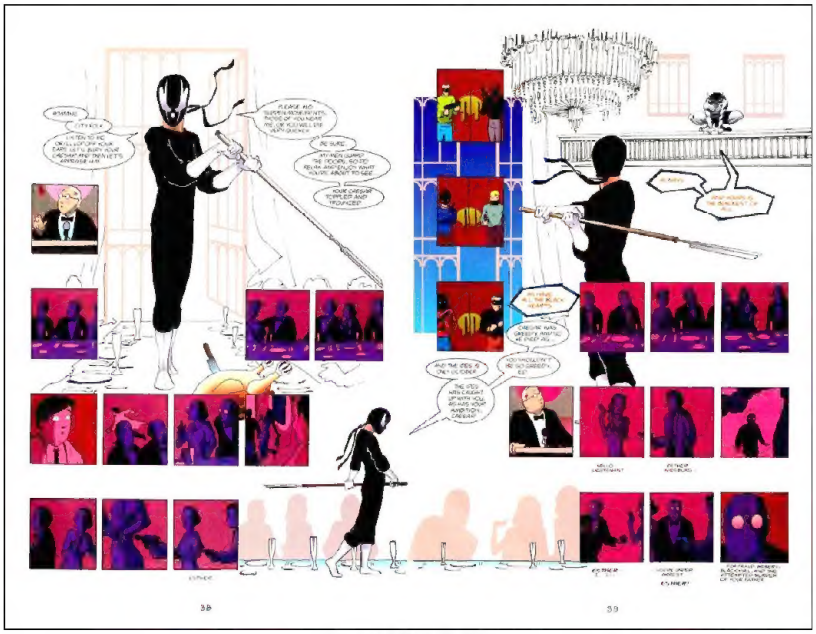
RD: Yeah. And of course because you're basing it off the Arthurian legend which of course was that type of story.

MW: Well I wasn't so much basing it off of the Arthurian legend as I was going instinctively on what appealed to me, and I was tapping into that archetype that is existing inside all of us and is hard wired into how we respond to the stories. I was telling just what I thought would be a good story, a story I'd want to read. The way that turned out is, that's the way all good stories that people want to read are. Then when I approached the second *Mage* series - *Mage* is ultimately going to be a trilogy - I just had always thought three was a great number, it has a good strength to it, you know a lot of fantasy trilogies are based around the number three, and it turns out according to Campbell

that it's a very distinct sort of three stages of the hero of reaching enlightenment.

So when it came time to do the second series I was a little more conscious about it. I very much turned to Campbell and approached it informed by the grand archetypes he had described. I find even that premeditation still didn't steal away from the spontaneity of what I was trying to do, and part of that was I tried to accentuate that by the fact that with the second *Mage* series for the first time ever, I worked on a comic story with no prep, no layouts, no thumbnails, sat down with blank pages and started drawing. Did it that way every issue. That's not to say in my mind I didn't already have some stuff broken up and know where I wanted things to go, but I sat down let the story take me where I thought it needed to go in the pace that it decided it needed to fit into these pages. So again I'm always trying to strike this balancing act of keeping everything very fresh, and keeping everything very eternal the same time.

That's also not to say that as I'm drawing I'm not already thinking about the dialogue you know. In fact I was talking with Darwin Cooke about this last night, he does the same thing, he draws his story first and scripts it later. And he said, which is very much the same as the way I feel about it when I'm working on, you're working on something and here's a page here's a character saying something, and you're already running through like four or five different ways they could be saying what they say. You hone that down to strike the characters eventual individual voice. Of course once you're several hundred pages into it you've got their voice pretty much nailed down. The finagling stage doesn't happen as much in issue #11 as it does in issue #2 you know. You're just more familiar with the characters at that point. As you're drawing them they're already speaking their voice inside your head.



Grendel Vol. 2, #17

I don't often find myself writing myself into a corner so to speak. I will often find myself hitting a block where I don't know what happens for several pages, but let's say I do know what happens several pages after that, well I'll just skip ahead and write the several pages, and might even just keep going all the way to the end of that issue. Then I come back and by that point then I know what needs to go in there that I wasn't able to fit in the rest of it or something that happens in those several pages that needs to be there to support something that happened later in the issue that I wasn't quite thinking of when I skipped over those pages to begin with. I go through and write the end and then the end sequencing will better inform me of what needed to take place during those blank pages that I skipped over.

Approach to Art

No matter how accomplished an artist you are, every time you sit down and look at that blank page, you think is it going to work this time? Every single time. Every single time. The key to success is to lay that fear aside and just stride right in and put down the first several marks. After the first several marks you go "Yep, it's gonna work this time."

RD: I guess if it doesn't, start over right?

MW: Start over, absolutely. I'm real good at the first several motions, gestural motions, I start to draw. I can tell whether, you know, just toss that out start that again.

RD: So you don't have to do like half a page and go "this ain't working?"

MW: No, no you can tell from the flow immediately. When I was in art school we had to do these things called gestural drawings where we'd have a live model there, and to warm up we'd have to do, we'll we'd start off with twenty second drawings and then pare it down to ten seconds, and you're not getting anything that looks like a human being there. But you'll get the skull and the shape of the spine and maybe a bit of a gesture of an arm or whatever. And believe me if those are right everything else will fall into place all around that. If those are wrong you could spend all afternoon packing in all the fine detail you want, it's still going to look like crap. The key is to get it, get that gesture at the beginning, get the get the essence of it. The rest is all surface dressing. The rest is all icing. If the foundation of the cake isn't baked right, the best icing in the world still not going to make it taste any damn good.

RD: And that would obviously apply across the board to things like composition.

MW: Oh absolutely.

RD: What about composition? What do you look for in composition when you're putting things together?

MW: You know composition varies from, here again being a writer/artist, composition varies from story to story, certain stories you want toe composition to be very static and banal, and the composition is just there to support the words, but in certain cases the words are just there to accentuate the composition. So it really does vary. I did several issues a long time ago of *Grendel*, which tends to be a collaborative effort where I'm working with other artists, but on occasion have stepped in and drawn of myself as well. I did four issues back in the 80s that where

I was trying to be very experimental and they were, it was 2 two-part stories, and they were both crime stories, and they were both done to be like two different types of crime stories. One was meant to be a police procedural, and the second was meant to be a psychological drama. For the first one I literally had twenty five panels a page that was block, block, block, block etc. And everything was very up close. It's all a cop investigating something, going from person to person, talking to the person. There were no word balloons inside each panel, it was all a section of dialogue sitting underneath each panel, so it's almost like looking at a story of art.

And the whole point of that was that these are the building blocks. These clues and calendars were the building blocks with which this guy was building this case, uncovering what's going on. And of course it all has to do with Grendel. Well then when Grendel shows up in the story he's too big, he's an inhuman force, he's too big to fit into the perceptions and assumptions of this cop, and then of course Argent shows up too and their battle takes place. Then of course the grid breaks up and these little square panels haven't gotten any bigger, but they're floating around free and chaotic in this giant fight that's going on.

Grendel V2, #16

Similarly then, the one that was more of a psychological drama, all the panels are big, tall, vertical panels and they tend to give you a feeling of not being so steady, you're jittering back and forth as this one characters slowly lose his mind and becomes extremely paranoid, and then ultimately get killed by Grendel. Everybody gets killed by Grendel. (Laughter) So that was an instance where I was really trying to make a very conscious decision to where my composition would enhance my story in a extremely rigid fashion. You know it's not always like that. Normally when you talk about composition, you're almost thinking per page, or even per panel. This was an instance where the composition overwhelmed and consumed the entire story from the very beginning to the very end.

That's one of the great joys of comics, is that'd be impossible to pull of in a film, you just couldn't get the same static shot, wouldn't have the same flavor, because you couldn't break it up in the same fashion. That's one of the utterly beautiful and unique things about comics is you have all these aspects that fall in to play. You know [Will] Eisner always said the difference between comics and film is that is the aspects of time and space you know. Time is space in comics, not the other way around. whereas space is time in the film.

RD: Because before the Batman TV show they were the funny books. After the TV show it Zif! Bap! Pow! and that's all the common view of it was, and it can be so much more than that if it's allowed to be. And it actually is inherently, but you know the perception is reality sometimes.

MW: Well and, OK following that through, it's no longer Biff! Pow! now. It's dark psycho drama. If you look at almost everything put out by the two companies nowadays it's all derivatives of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

RD: There was such a paradigm shift.

MW: It was such a paradigm shift and I'm tired of it. I mean I even do part of it myself, Grendel's that, but you know believe me I get sick to death of seeing - the image that really offends me is pissed-off Superman. Every time you see Superman now a days he's glowering, his eyes are glowing red like he's going to burn me into pieces, he's you know yelling and punching somebody. That's not Superman. Superman was there to save people and to be the ultimate Boy Scout and the good guy you know? You think of those images from Christopher Reeve from the Donner movie and him doing that kind of just jovial little salute, like you know "Helped you out, see you later!" You don't see that at all in the Superman comics anymore, doesn't exist. I think that was one of the factors that made the *Iron Man* movie such a hit. It was fun again. Now much as I like *Batman Begins*, and I like a bunch of the comic book movies, they are following a common trend which is this dark pissed off loner who feels compelled to do it.

RD: Because what you have done with Mage and in how you did that with incorporating your personal experiences and viewpoint. Maybe that's where everybody else goes with theirs is the dark stuff.

MW: Because everybody is dark and pissed off? (Laughter)

RD: (Laughter) Well it becomes an expression of what you want to put out there. I mean you can always make the case that some of the stuff is just a fantasy empowerment stories or whatever, and that's fine but if it is then there's a lot of pissed off people then apparently because that's how expressing itself.

MW: Yeah, yeah, well I think a lot of people are pissed off. The world's a dangerous place these days, the sense of personal security is just nonexistent. You know it used to be if you had a good job and you worked hard you were fairly certain that you were going to be able to retire and be OK. It's absolutely not that anymore. You wonder if you can even fill your car with gas these days to get to work. And you know the fear everybody has of growing old I think is not only the result of the various sexiness of filmed imagery, but also stuck in there somewhere is the fear that you won't be able to survive when you're old, that you'll end up in some smelly sub par old folks home and that your old age, instead of being your golden years, is going to be your muddy years or your disintegrating years you know?

I think it's kind of funny and maybe a little too obvious to point out that I'm a Libra and I have these two narratives. They're utterly different from each other and they enable me to express my hope and my despair in very separate

rooms that I have the key to both of them. (Laughter) I think that really works great for me.

RD: That's very Zen. You get the opposite ends of the spectrum, you get to explore both. Was that a conscious decision?

MW: Nope!

RD: It just came out that way?

MW: But there again that that too plays into the way I approach everything.

RD: Did you kind of look at them at one point early on like that and kind of say "Boy this is really the opposite of the other!"

MW: Truthfully no, no. It just never occurred to me. Again I'm always just telling stories you know? I've always had this, whenever I work for DC, I've always had a great love for their big icons, for Superman and Batman. And yeah, you know, you can say that they're wish fulfillment and they're wish fulfillment and in certain very specific ways, because one involves hope and one involves, I wouldn't call it despair, but a certain cynical reality. When you're a young kid, you want to be Superman right? You want to fly, you want to see through walls, you want to have super strength. But as you grow older you get to be a teenager. You know you're never going to fly, you know you're never going to see through walls, you know you're not invulnerable. So what do you want to be? You want to be rich, you want to be smart, you want to be sneaky. You want to be Batman. (Laughter)

THIS WON'T BE EXTREMELY POWERFUL, YOU UNDERSTAND
IT'S EFFECT WILL BE SIMILAR TO A CATTLE PROD
BUT IT SHOULD HELP
A MAGIC BASEBALL BAT?
WHY NOT?
YEAH, SURE WHY NOT?
Mage #3

RD: That's right. Batman's the one thing you could be, or someone could be.

MW: Yeah that's right, that's right. Well and additionally Superman has a certain - when you think of Superman it has a childish sort of you know "look up in the sky! look at the wonder of that!, Oooo!" and wouldn't you like to be the object of that wonder. Were you know Batman has this sleek sexiness to it where he zooms in and zooms out, like "who was that? who was that guy?" You'll never know because he's off on his own doing his own thing, you'll never catch him! That's such a teenage thing as opposed to a childhood thing you know?

RD: Yeah that's an interesting analysis of those ideas. I think that's probably why they're such...

MW: Icons. That's why they're icons.

RD: And that's why people respond to them so much is because people can fall, we can appreciate both of them.

MW: Yeah and you know truthfully, if you look at how they came about, I mean on one level a lot of superhero stories are just merchandising dreck, but the reason I think the reason Mage and Grendel work and the reasons Superman and Batman work is because they weren't too pre-considered, they just kind of sprung forth as a group of ideas. Superman was created by two young Jews. So the aspect of them creating a messiah in America just makes perfect sense you know. I just read Gerry Jones's book *Men of Tomorrow,* which explores more of the reality of the early comic book creator's lives as opposed to just their publishing history. He said the inspiration was when he read anything about Siegel and Schuster, all he saw was bibliography and not biography, and he discovered that Harry Siegel's father was shot and killed by a burglar when Jerry was sixteen years old. The fact that this, at age 17, this young man creates his messiah and makes him bulletproof that gives that creation again a resonance that is deep and iconic and heart felt.

Similarly Bob Kane truthfully was trying to emulate the success of Superman, yet at the same time Bob Kane wasn't a Midwestern boy, he was a city boy, he lived in the city and his fantasy was to, you know, be the man about town, wear the cool-as-shit costume, sneak around at night, in and out of nightclubs, over the rooftops. That has a similar purity to it that I think is the key to the sense of that and the longevity of that character.

RD: And of course you try to do that with your stuff where you take that personal aspect and put it into your work.

MW: You can see that aspect in my work very clearly in *Mage*, it's there in *Grendel* too.

RD: So you have that dark of a side to you?

MW: Sure I think everybody does you know? I mean there's dating back to the old the Jimmy Carter campaign where he confessed in Playboy that he had committed adultery many times in his own heart. Well you know that raised such a stink it was idiotic. Of course everybody has! I think everybody's committed murder in their own heart too. It's your logical sense combined with your kind of dominating super ego that lets you escape these base impulses, but to deny that those base impulses are there is just idiotic. When you turn your back on the shadows that are inside of yourself, the shadows just get bigger and they cast a longer shadow and they gain more power. But I was young like Hunter Rose, I was not tall and svelte and sophisticated. I wanted to be a man around town, and of course when you're that age who doesn't long for the attitude of I'm a cultured gentleman, but if you f**k with me I will destroy you with a flick of my wrist. And that's Hunter Rose.

Similarly with Christine Spar, I had started dating a woman who had a young child, and I got to see up close and personal the fiery maternal protectiveness that I had never perceived as an adult. Following that, the Brian Li Sung story in *Grendel* about a man slowly going insane by

himself in a cold urban environment. I had broken up with this woman, I had dropped out of school, I was feeling those sort of situations myself. The whole *God and The Devil* storyline, I had married into a Catholic family and I got to see that up close for the first time. So all those aspects are there in *Grendel*. I just pull them in, twist them around into some giant horror story, and portray them much darker than I really perceived them, but that's part of art is to exaggerate and abstract things. I'll never forget one of my first drawing teachers telling me that Pablo Picasso had to learn how to draw what bodies really looked like before he learned how to contort them into how he perceived them. Picasso himself has a famous quote that it took him his whole life to learn how to draw like a child.

In the first *Mage* it is all about the ascendancy and the discovery of power. The second *Mage* is about the presumptions of power and how it might not be what you thought it was. In *Mage* it has to do with his reliance on the fact that his power comes from that bat, and we find out at the end that that bat is just a shape and had nothing to do with the power, the power is you. The third one, well it remains to be seen, but I will work my way through that. The third one is called *The Hero Denied* so that certainly starts us off on a somewhat dark note doesn't it? But again *Mage* is about hope, The Hero's Journey is about transcendence, and you don't tell the hero's journey to end up in hell. You tell the hero's journey to come back out of hell.

RD: At what point did you decide it would be a trilogy, was that right at the beginning?

MW: Right at the beginning.

RD: You kinda knew you were going to go there?

MW: Yep.

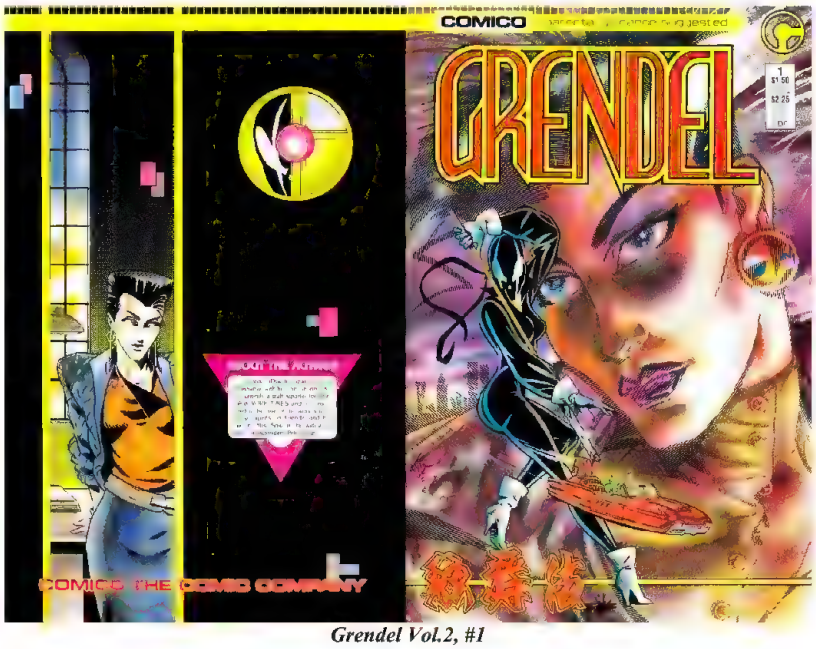
RD: Ok but given that it's been 20 years or so-

MW: No, I had no idea what I was going to do. Absolutely not.

RD: So you didn't know where *Mage 3* was going to end up?

MW: Nope, still don't. It is literally a journey for me you know. In the case of *Mage 2*, I had to live far enough ahead past the immediacy of the events I was going to describe. In *Mage*, I was kind of in those events at the time. I needed distance in the second one and I think I'll need even a little more distance in the third one. I'm almost there. I forsee the third *Mage* coming about within the next five years probably. Just because I just know the events in my life that I'm hoping to describe and I certainly don't want to get too far past them to where those memories aren't immediate for me right anymore.

RD: Yeah you don't want them to be foggy.



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MW: Yeah I don't want it to be the distant past. I don't mind them being the past, but I don't want to lose the freshness of how I felt during that time period.

RD: Because it's so vital to what you do with *Mage*, that immediacy.

MW: Exactly, exactly.

Creating Characters

I create characters kind of on a whim. I know I'm sounding a but like broken record here, but I approach everything kind of in the same way with a certain amount of premeditation and a certain amount of spontaneity. I never write out a biography of a character, I never over consider the character. I get a feeling for the character, their name will pop into my head, their personality will be suggested by some incident and then slowly develop as I tell more of their tale. Sometimes we'll do model sheets, more often just a variety of quick sketches. I tend to work stuff out on the page more than in any pre-production sort of fashion. Sometimes I look in the back of these collected volumes and there's 50 or 60 extra pages of pre-production stuff in the back and I just think "Wow! Those guys are thinking about this more than I do!" (Laughter)

RD: (Laughter) So you don't like have a library of characters names and what not to pull just in case you need them?

MW: Nope.

RD: When you need them you just start putting them in?

MW: Yep. They enter the story on their own. Again I try to treat the stories as if, for all intents and purposes, they're real, as if they already exist before I approach them you know? I don't want them to be that much in my control until I get there, until I actually lay my fingers on it. The stories are kind of eternal. The interactions of the characters, the repercussions of their actions or inactions, kind of already exist in the regards to how I approach it. And so basically I'm just slowly uncovering a world that's already there, just peeling back the layer till it's legible to me and engaging to everybody else.

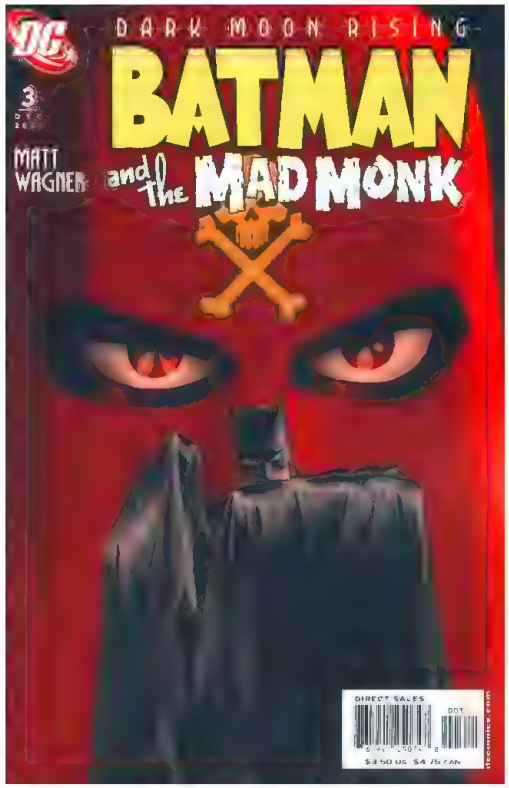
RD: I think a lot of people would probably be pretty jealous of that facility.

MW: (Laughter) You know I don't find that to be any sort of unique capacity. I think that's there for everybody. I think too many people over think this stuff and really think there's a right and wrong and there's not, there's just a true and a false, and that's completely different than right and wrong. And if you're looking for truth you will find it somehow. I think also everybody tends to worry about pleasing their

audience too much and I don't try to please my audience. Try and please me, and if it pleases me it's going to please enough of my audience you know? I know I'm not going to please all my audience all the time. I don't care to. That attitude is kind of an overwhelming vanity, that attitude to think you can be that much in control, to control how your audience is going to react. You can't.

RD: Wouldn't that also, you think, put you in almost a paralysis because how do you know what to do then? If I do this I'll piss off somebody over here, if I do this it won't work for somebody else, and what do you write? You're not getting to any truth then.

MW: Oh Absolutely. My sister in law and my editor Diana Shutz, my longtime editor, teaches a course at one of our local colleges basically comics as literature, comics as art, I forget what the actual course title is now, but she would find that she would get these young people signing up for this course thinking "Oh! A course where all I do is read comic books!" Of course they get there and she's demanding a whole lot more out of them. They have to write analysis papers and most specifically they have to produce a mini comic, and this scares the living by bejesus out of a half of them. So I come in and I do a presentation where I show my work, I show a lot of my cover work, I show my interior work, and it's obviously very professional, and very accomplished, sophisticated in it's rendering abilities and such. Then I do this quick down and dirty little slap-dash storytelling demonstration where I get them to generate some ideas. We throw them all in a hat, Diana pulls them out of the hat one by one and on transparencies I draw them right with an overhead projector.



Batman: The Mad Monk #3

And of course they look like shit. And the whole point is "But look highly developed stuff came from this." Aside from the spit and polish, the idea is exactly the same, so don't be fearful when you sit down look at that blank page that what you render is not going to look as good as your favorite artist. It can only look as good as your favorite you. If you do it more your favorite you will develop into a different favorite you. It's like thinking that you can sit down with a guitar and pluck out a song right away. You can't. You get better as you go. Everything is you get better as you go. It's repetition and paying attention to the fine tunings of whatever art form you're engaging in that helps make you more accomplished as time goes by. I don't want to use the term "better" there. More accomplished.

RD: And there is also an important aspect of getting it out.

MW: Oh yeah absolutely. Get it down. It's not just an idea floating around, it all the sudden it's concrete. It has come to fruition and you can edit after it's come to fruition in many respects. You can do white out, you can rip out pages altogether, but you can't do those to ideas.

Separating The Art From The Business

MW: I did an online interview recently where somebody talked about if you look at almost anybody else in the industry there's some dark mark, something they could be ashamed of project wise, or some way they've handled themselves poorly and in regards to a professional and a public manner. He said "And for you it's just not there, there's just not a spot there like that." And I said well OK I would maybe debate that. The point he was trying to make, and which I agree with, and the way I've always tried to approach things is, aside from the sheer logistics of the business of comics, I try to pay no damn attention to the business of comics. I don't care whose on Wizard's top ten that month. I don't care if I'm the highest selling artist. I don't care about the inner office politics. I don't care about the war between Marvel and DC. I don't care about any of this shit. All that is political banality that just doesn't interest me. I'm here to live my life as an artist and express my life through my art. The fact that I have to go through it in a business sense is just, I consider it the same way as I have to trim my toenails.

So I really try and keep out the above all that you know. Certainly I go and I work for DC and I work for publishers other than just my *Mage* and *Grendel* microcosm. But I think I'm saved by the fact that I know I can always come back to *Mage* and *Grendel* you know. If ever anything gets a little too crazy for me or dealing with the politics of corporate publishing just gets to be too (long pause) overwhelming (laughter), I know I can come back. I think that has granted me a certain Zen-like peace on the whole process you know? I mean if you look at most all of my contemporaries, aside from a few, most of them started out in the trenches in the big machines and then dug their way to creative freedom. I did it the other way around. I started out where whatever I did, I did, and it was right. Eventually I went to work for the big machines under my own terms. And if you look at anything I've ever done for DC, in keeping with that, it's always set early in a character's career. I only realized this recently myself and I realized why that is. I don't want to mess with the continuity, I just don't care. I want the opportunity to do my own little gig with it and I don't really care what happened in issue #473. I'll look through a character's history, I'll cherry pick the parts I like, I will bring my sensibilities to the big archetypes of what are there.

For instance when I did *Trinity*, we had some complaints from people like "well at that stage Wonder Woman didn't have the invisible jet yet" and I'm never writing to that level of fan. I'm never writing that level of reader. I'm writing to an ordinary reader. To an ordinary reader, Wonder Woman has the invisible jet. That's all there is to it you know? I'm always writing to the sort of reader I am, which is somebody who enjoys comics. Somebody who knows the grand overview but doesn't particularly care about the exacting minutiae.

RD: And that's the thing, sometimes it gets a little much with the larger companies and their established continuities.

MW: Oh and especially this crazy crossover things they do these days.

RD: I think we are actually approaching a period now where there is an ongoing crossover event *continually*.

MW: Yeah it's a little outdated now. It's one of the sad thing about comics is it takes so long to produce them and so short to consume them. Which to my mind is even more reason why you need to strike this emotional resonance and not just be fiddling things just to fiddle you know? You need to hit something that's true and something people will remember, not something that only the continuity hounds are going to remember. I think you need to continually strive to hit some sort of eternal truth with these things, and if you have these giant crossover events which change things, change the entire shake up of the structure of the DCU one week, and then six months later they're changing it again some other fashion. Can't all this happen as a result of stories just unfolding naturally? Does it have to be this giant structure?

All the stuff we remember about comics from our younger days are all things just happened and occurred naturally in the stories. Like for instance, the whole R'as al Ghul storyline that Neal Adams Denny O'Neil did, that was not trying to significantly change Batman, that was trying to introduce a new villain and tell a new interesting tale. And as a result all of a sudden here was a guy who had discovered Batman's secret identity, that was kind of a first. Here was Batman with a girlfriend, a very hot love affair, that was kind of a first too. They always had flirtations with the other female characters but I'll never forget when I was a kid that that one panel Adam's drew of Batman after he's fought R'as Al Ghul sweeping Talia off her feet for this giant smoldering kiss! Like wow, that's memorable because again there's some true emotion happening there you know?

Comico Primer #2

I just don't think you're going to find that in these inter-company, highly structured, written by committee crossover events. Again it all comes down to two guys, one or two guys. In my mind one of the greatest accomplishments in comics history is *Lone Wolf and Cub*. I look at it you have somewhere between eight and nine thousand pages of continuity by two guys. Same two guys from beginning to end. And it's that purity, I think a purity of vision that really makes the most resonant, memorable, and eternal comics. Purity of vision is what will save comics you know? What will keep comics relevant and pertinent and fresh for many years to come.

Comic Book Movies

Used to be whenever they would make films out of comic books they would try and fix the comic book. And now they go out of their way to try to make the film like the comic book in every way they possibly can. And here again I think Hollywood realizes what an amazing, unfettered petri dish of ideas the comic book world is, and the capacity of one or two people telling, in an unrestricted sense, imaginative stories visually. They realize what a deep, deep, deep well this is for them to plumb. Back in the old days Hollywood would try and plumb the world of novelists and it never worked out. Raymond Chandler went and worked for Hollywood for a while, wrote a few things. Dashiell Hammett went and worked with Hollywood for a while and wrote next to nothing. William Faulkner wrote for a while, it ate away their souls and you never saw what was special about the books end up on screen for the most part.

But the difference here is that we employ the visual medium like novels don't do. Novels rely on the written word alone and the beauty in the evocative qualities of words, whereas we rely on the beauty and evocative quality of images. I think Hollywood just realizes what a just limitless well they have here right down the road from L.A. to San Diego and boy in the last several years the San Diego con is just overwhelmed by Hollywood presence. You know strangely enough I just noticed this year for the first time, maybe second time, at Wonder Con, which takes place in San Francisco, it's almost like Hollywood went "San Diego's getting kind of full. There's another one right up the road!" (Laughter) So the Hollywood presence is creeping in the Wonder Con as well. But the point is I think Hollywood realizes you've got this purity of vision. Stuff doesn't have time to sit and be over considered when you're working on it in that sense.

Comico

You know one of the things I find kind of distressing about comic books these days is the advent of bookstore distribution. You almost have to plan like a year in advance for what you're going to release, whereas it used to be comics had this kind of like just slap-dash, almost punk rock sort of attitude, you know? It's done, get it to the printer, it's on the stands in like a couple of weeks, and I used to love that, the ferocity of that turnover of product. I remember when I finished the first *Mage* series we were up all night coloring. Joe Matt was my colorist on *Batman/Grendel*, all he was kind of my shadow assistant on *Mage* towards the end as well, and we were up all night coloring that puppy. We're still up the next day and finishing it, finishing it, finishing it, we got on the train to head out to the Comico offices, which were just outside of Philadelphia, I lived in downtown Philadelphia at the time, got on the train, boogied out there, got the train, got to the offices, we real quick pasted down the page numbers, and got it packaged up, and boogied out to FedEx, and shipped it to the separators - before they did in house scans they had the ship everything out to be

color separated - and got to FedEx two and a half minutes before it closed on Friday afternoon. (Laughter) The sense of accomplishment, triumph, and release was so amazing!
As I mentioned a bit earlier, I met the fellows that ultimately formed Comico in art school on the elevator one day and they always had this dream of forming a publishing company. This was in the early 80s when this option seemed a viable option, up until then that didn't exist. There were only the big publishers, you had to live in New York to work for them, there was no overnight delivery service, to get a job you had to come in on the subway and you showed up at the offices and they said "OK this week you're inking *Iron Man*. Here it is, take it home, bring it back in three days." With the advent of overnight delivery and the direct sales distribution market, all of a sudden independent art rose up in comics. And that was just mirroring what was happening overall in pop culture. Independent films were happening, independent music was happening, all of a sudden the artist had the say, not the publishing house or his distributor.

So we all were like these just crazy ass art students who had this dream of forging our own path, and we all kind of dropped out of school to follow that dream. The early years were lean and hungry. The unfortunate thing about Comico in the early days was we all had a great design sense, so in the Previews catalog - and at that point there was also Capital City, so there was than one distributor - our ads looked great, and our books looked like shit! Ultimately Comico was able to entice the interest of a variety of other creators, most significantly at the beginning Chuck Dixon and his then wife Judith Hunt. They were assigned to do a book called *Evangeline* which was about a kind of futuristic religious dystopia. They were interested in doing what's known as gang printing. When you're printing any sort of book the printing presses are so wide that you can easily print two comic books side-by-side, and you can print two comics, two titles, for pretty much the same price as you would print one, because of a certain minimum number of copies that they will run through. Well if you're running through those copies on X side, you can easily run through another one over here, and in fact these days publishers do all sorts of things in what they call the trim section. They'll print bookmarks, flyers, giveaways, all sorts of stuff. They make absolute most use of the paper available. In those days, as far as we thought about it, was just gang printing two books at once.

Grendel Vol. 1, #2

So Comico in those days couldn't really afford to sign another outside talent, so it fell to one of the four initial core group of creators to create this new book for color distribution where we had been black and white before. And I by default was the one who had the least amount of negative fan mail on *Grendel*, so I got the golden ticket to do up a new series in color and that turned out to be *Mage*. I returned to this thought of kind of Arthurian legend interpreted in modern day. At that time I considered *Grendel* as kind of a failed experiment, like "All right, tried that, didn't quite take off, got this other opportunity. Let me face forward and move ahead and approach that." So we started out and *Evangeline* was kind of a hit right off the bat, that was the Chuck Dixon title, but *Evangeline* seemed to be one of those titles that was concept heavy more than story heavy you know? Great idea, where do you go with it? After you see the Nun assassinate the first person in the name of the Vatican, meh, you could see her assassinate a hundred people it's just not going to be quite the same. Whereas *Mage*, although it was nowhere near as technically accomplished as *Evangeline*, seemed to have a goal in mind and was moving towards a narrative realization, a narrative climax, that *Evangeline* didn't quite have.

Eventually Comico broadened their scope and started to incorporate other creators and other titles and other scenarios. At the same time they kept publishing *Mage* and it wasn't a hit for a while, but its readership steadily grew and eventually I started to hear back from variety of readers. Once *Mage* started to find its feet, I started to find my voice as a creator. I started to hear from older fans who said "Whatever happened to *Grendel*? You were doing this story about *Grendel?*" and *Grendel* were these initial black and white stories were structured in such a way that you knew there was an end. We basically started with the end of the story and were flashing back, so even those days I was looking for an oddball way of approaching a story. And I thought well why not? I got this character, I got this idea, why don't I kind of rework it based around my kind of more accomplished visual powers now you know? Why don't I rework it and eventually that became a 4 page backup feature in *Mage* that ultimately was later collected and became *Devil by the Deed* which is the first official *Grendel* storyline.

The point was what made *Mage* so special, and I think one of the things that really connected with people in that first story line was, I was growing up as a creator, and I was growing into my power as an artist, and as that was happening to me it was happening to Kevin Matchstick, the main character, who of course looked like me. So it was really imbued with this absolutely real power and transcendence and an echo of the hero's journey that it just happened as a time and place sort of thing. I couldn't have planned it that way. It had to happen as a result of me just boldly venturing forward unafraid, unprepared, and undeterred and eventually all those pieces came together and became the *Mage* that everybody came to know and love. Now at the same time when I was adapting *Grendel* into being this backup feature in *Mage*, whereas as before I had had a whole issue, 30 pages at that point, of black and white story to tell a *Grendel* chapter, now I had four pages.

So I had to kind of coalesce the same amount of emotional punch and the same amount of dramatic instance into four pages as I had done in 30 before. So I struck upon the idea of doing it almost as an illustrated novel. I had a very

design-y sort of a layout, it was very much evocative of art deco design, and then I had these blocks of text floating around the page telling the story, and it told the story in a very obtuse manner. We've talked about *Grendel* as this grand criminal genius and this underworld mastermind and all these dark adventures he had had that so affected the public's psyche in the way they thought about him as a character and as a person. You know we never really showed those adventures, just referred to them, and that made them mysterious and cool and you kind of filled in those dark spots in your own mind. As a result it really clicked.

Again here's the Libra aspect: because it was not only the thematically the opposite of *Mage*, it was dramatically the opposite of *Mage*. *Mage* is told with no captions, *Mage* is told with all dialogue. So it contrasted against this story that took place in the back pages of *Mage*. That was all captions and no dialogue. So that all just fell into place very beautifully and carried through the 15 issues of *Mage*. *Grendel* wrapped up in the 14th issue because I felt I needed the whole last double sized issue of *Mage* to just go out on a giant bang. That was that was how I basically found my footing in the publishing world of comics and then took my first steps towards the realization of the artist I am today.

RD: Or being the superstar you are now!

MW: Ah, whatever! (Laughter) It really was my steps towards being the hero discovered you know? Towards a discovery of power, an acceptance of power, a realization of power, and again readers intimately felt that connection toward seeing Kevin go through these stages because I was going through those stages. I was describing in him my personal journey.

RD: As he came into his own so did you.

MW: Absolutely

Mage 3?

MW: You know I've taken a lot of grief over the years for the amount of time it took me to do a *Mage* 2, yet at the same time I think it's kind of healthy not only for me but for the readers to have to wait that long you know? We live in an age when everybody just wants everything right now and they're going to get it now. There's a certain grace towards waiting. There's a certain maturity towards aging. You can't rush the aging process, it has to happen at its own pace.

WELL, AS YOU'VE ALREADY SEEN, IT'LL RETURN TO MY HAND WHEN THROWN.
AND SO, ONS AR I MIN IT'S GENERAL VICINITY I'M FAIRLY RESISTANT TO HARM. MORE SO IF I'M IN TIME.
NORMALLY, I'M RIGHT-HANDED BUT--WITH THE BAT MY AIM AND DEXTERITY ARE FLAWLESS.
MY BALANCE AND AGILITY PRECISE
NOW
GET A LOAD OF THIS ONE
13
Mage: The Hero Defined #3

RD: So many things are so disposable and this has had staying power. It's almost a delayed gratification sort of thing when you think about it because there was such a wait between the first and second. I think maybe people appreciated both of them more.

MW: Oh boy! Due to the wait between the first in the second series of course you had a definite increase in appreciation, you also had a definite increase disappointment. Of course people had already built up their own minds what it was going to be. No matter what anybody thinks it should be, it is me, and me is only me and it can only be me.

Really if you look at the two structurally they're identical. They are 15 fifteen issues each, they go in four issue segments. It's exactly the same in *Mage* 2. The way the character comes to the realizations he comes to happens in exactly the same pacing. It's just that his state of being is completely different. People came into the second series wanting Kevin to still have the same sense of doubts and the same personal foibles and perceptions that he did in the first one and I kept saying to people "Were you the same in college as you were in high school?" I wasn't, I don't think anybody was. God knows they shouldn't be. When you're in high school, which is what I kind of consider, even though Kevin's older than that, but you know the changes he's going through are so dramatic that you can consider him in high school. By the time you're in college you're pretty damn full of yourself you know? You're pretty damn like "I got it all figured out!" You don't have shit figured out at that point you know? You don't understand anything about the realities of being an adult and the responsibilities you have in the world.

So by the time you get to the end of the series and you realize not only is the focal point of what you thought Kevin's role, but also his power, is not applicable, but this other supporting character - I don't want to ruin too much for anybody - who was right in front of your face the whole time and who's wearing an article of clothing that is right in front of your face the whole time is somebody you didn't recognize as being somebody else. To my mind there are bigger surprise than finding out that Kevin was King Arthur you know? Most people already had that figured out in the first series. It was the fun of just seeing Kevin slowly figure it out. In this instance the reader didn't have it figured out. I remember somebody writing me and saying well there were no surprises in the 15th issue of *Mage*, and I said "No surprises??" There was literally a surprise every third page. You know you turn the page and it was like, well this wasn't what you thought, this wasn't what you thought, THIS wasn't what you thought! To my mind that's what made it *The Hero Defined* was not defining what he is, but defining what he wasn't, and it's when you figure out what you're not that you're a little bit closer to figuring out what you are. And we'll see how that goes in the third one! (Laughter)

RD: Here you've got *Mage*, again it's the Hero's Journey, he figures out his power, he learns some things along the way, finally kicks ass at the end and does whatever he does and the story ends. But most of that in that type of

story is fairly, superficially, it's the action power blah blah blah stuff.

MW: Yeah sure.

RD: Then you get a second story where it goes a bit deeper because now it's a little less about the obvious power displays or what have you and more about what's he gonna do with it, how's he going to understand it. Am I on to something there?

MW: Well that's right except the first batch of letters were exactly the opposite, were complaining to me that this doesn't have the depth -

RD: Oh really??

MW: - and that below the surface, this is just about the display of powers. I remember one letter said to me "All I see here is a 30-something creator imagining what it would be like to have super powers." And I just thought "Oh boy are you sooo wrong." (Laughter) Again through all the letters columns that we ran in the back there I just kept you know harping back at people like "Look you have to be considering this to be a movie." Why are you writing the review of the movie after seeing twenty minutes of it? Wait until we get to the end and then you can tell me what you think.

RD: But the thing is, like you were describing before, as you grow you change. At least we should and most people do inevitably one way or the other, whether they want to or not. And it becomes a "What do you change into?" that becomes what defines you as you go through your life.

MW: Absolutely and both *Mage* and *Grendel* truthfully at their heart are about growth. *Grendel* unfortunately is about the lack of growth, is about atrophy, is about great ideas that run afoul due to the way people exercise their options within that growth period. *Mage* is growing up whether you want to or not. It's going to happen, deal with it. Frank Herbert was a whole lot more cynical about the hero's journey and about how it just wouldn't work out, it just couldn't work out, but I think he was viewing that in a social/political sense, whereas I view it in a personal/spiritual journey sense. I think in a personal sphere it can definitely work out. I think in a social/political sense sure it's never going to work out because humankind never going to perfect itself to that degree.

Grendel: Devil By The Deed #1

But a person can perfect themselves to that degree. Jesus was somewhat of a political reformer, but Jesus was talking about changing your personal behavior. Your personal transcendence as was the Buddha. The Buddhist spoke about that exclusively, the Buddha foreswore any sort of political involvement. You know this world doesn't matter. Look in here and look beyond and then you will find transcendence. So I guess that's a little bit more my approach, I still pare down the social/political scene in *Mage* to an immediate small grouping, not a world wide political scenario, not a savior. You know Kevin's not out to save the world. If he's saving the world the world doesn't know it and doesn't care. He's saving the world inside himself, and I think to my mind if you save the world inside yourself, you've saved one particle of the world around you.

Revisiting Grendel

After I basically reinvented *Grendel* in the back pages of *Mage*, although reinvention isn't really quite the right term, it's more a reinterpretation, for years I was beset with this "Why don't you reprint those early black and white stories? Are you ashamed of them?" No I'm not ashamed anything about my life you know? I mean of course everybody's a tiny bit ashamed about something they did, but I don't have any grand dark secrets and anything I published is there, somebody can find it, it would be ridiculous to be ashamed of stuff and try and suppress something that's available somewhere. No my whole attitude was that I had taken that same story line and I had reinterpreted it, I had finished it, I had taken it through to its logical conclusion, we had seen the end of that version of *Grendel,* and you know I'm all about the story. If I make money out of it that's a happy side result. I wasn't really looking to cash that early incomplete story in on a cheap buck. Now, years later, just last year in fact, it being the 25th anniversary of *Grendel*, I thought "Well this is an apropos time to republish that work." It's a hallmark in the career of this character and in my career and it's time to re-present this as almost like issuing the first recordings of *The Beatles* you know? Like here you go, here's the beginning. This is a lot different than *Sergeant Pepper's* or *Abbey Road* (Laughter). Hopefully you will see the nuggets that became that greater, more complex, more accomplished, and more assured piece of work.

So after we had redone *Grendel* in *The Devil by the Deed* in the back of the pages of *Mage*, we decided, the publisher asked me to see if I could figure out a way to continue *Grendel* as a monthly. And A) that was quite a paradox for me because I had just killed the character, but it's comic books and magic and all sorts of stuff. And B) I had never pictured myself at that point as doing a continuing story. I've always worked in finite stories. I'm perfectly willing to extend the story past its beginning, middle, and end, but my stories all have beginning, middles and ends, and thus so did the story of Hunter Rose.

So I started to think about how can I possibly do an ongoing monthly series, and I struck upon the idea of having Grendel become a generational character. You know the persona of Grendel would move from character to carriage character, it would not remain a static story, it would move ahead, there would be consequences, people

would die, characters wouldn't always survive to move on and fight the next day. Grendel would but not his, or its, various host bodies. So basically I turned the continuing series into an ongoing progression of mini series. And to my mind that was the only way I could afford to keep it interesting to myself and again, as I said a little earlier, it has to be interesting to me before it's going to be interesting to the readers. So I just kept pushing this further and further ahead you know we had to go from Hunter Rose to Christine Spar to Brian Li Sung eventually start jumping generations, and then centuries into the future, and eventually we ended up far, far, far in the future in a and dystopian future, of post nuclear holocaust, and I had succeeded in turning the title of Grendel, which during the Hunter Rose Days was a very heinous, very scary term to use in public, into one of the more honored words in that futuristic a dystopian society.

When I look back on it now that was pretty bold approach you know? To push it so fast and so far was something that, I mean people just don't do that now a days you know? I'm gonna use another Beatles analogy here, and I in no way consider myself on par with the Beatles, but you know I always pointed out to people the Beatles wrote all those songs that we know, all those songs that have become such a part of our pop culture vocabulary. They wrote all those songs in the seven years. All of them.

RD: That's true. What was that, '63 to '70 right?

MW: Yeah. You know I've pushed Grendel to the stage of *Grendel Prime* and *Warchild* in three and a half years, and I really appreciate the time and place in which I was afforded that opportunity, when there was no restrictions, there were no preconceptions. Everything was this wide open schism of creativity and I was really able to push ahead. And I will say I probably left a lot of my readers in the dust at that point, a lot of them lost interest as I went on, a lot them got pissed off at me for her not having several issues where there was no active Grendel in costume It was Grendel had become almost kind of a sociological spirit, and you know a lot of readers were like "Pfft! Why am I buying this, this sucks!" Those that stuck with it grew to really, really love it and become very, very enrapt with it, and then you know we ended that whole the first, what I would call the first enormous segment of the Grendel saga with the *War Child* story line, which is just a giant kitchen sink action fest from hell. So a lot of people only got into it then because it was so welcoming, you really didn't know what was going on, you just jumped in and it's a giant roller coaster ride with lots of action and vampires and pirates and killer bees and mutants and nuclear devices and cyborgs and I just threw everything fun shit I could in throw in. (Laughter) So I thought that was a really cool way to end up what I had been this pretty vast and maybe foolish experiment but I think it all paid off in the end.

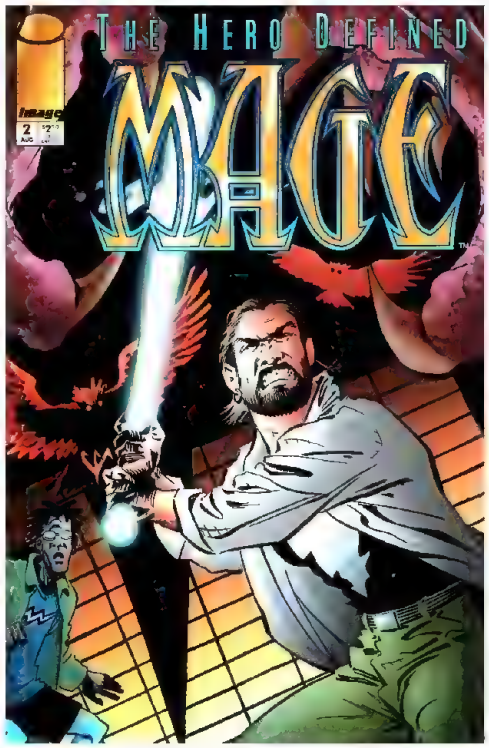
Grendel: War Child #1

People often ask me what exactly is Grendel, and my truthful answer is "I don't quite know either." You know that's part of the fun is it's a continual question. This is why most organized religions don't really appeal to me, because they try to provide answers where I think the questions are what's important. For a while we kind of portrayed Grendel as almost a conscious entity, as a demon if you will, that moved as I said earlier from host body to host body. Later it becomes a sociological phenomenon, and I tend to think of Grendel more as a sequence of events. In every case it's an exploration of violence and aggression. It's trying to figure out what violent means in society and what its motivations are.

I said a little bit earlier that *Mage* is me looking inward and *Grendel* is me looking outward, and I guess I must have a fairly dark outlook on the world (Laughter). But then I have a personal hope for personal redemption obviously. I don't know, the world seems a scary and f**ked up place to me, and as I mentioned earlier initially Grendel was kind of a wish fulfillment thing with Hunter Rose being this kind of idealized monster, when you're in your late teens you want a certain undeniable say so, you want to be done with answering to your parents, you don't want to be answering to your teachers, you don't want to be answering to the government, you don't want to be answering to anybody, you want to be like "Whatever I say goes. F**k you all!" And that's certainly Hunter Rose you know? But the more I get into it, the more I started examining well, what is it about this sort of aggressive - what is so fascinating about violence? Because violence is fascinating, you know you can't tear eyes away from it and yet you want to tear your eyes away from it. In the same way that sex is fascinating. You can't tear your eyes away from it and yet decorum kinda asks that you provide a certain privacy to people in their sexual moments, yet we're all voyeuristic as hell you know? Look at the porn industry, its like shot off the roof in the Internet age. But what is it about violence? It's fascinating and you know it occurs to me that sex and violence are interesting because they are the tail ends of life. Sex is the beginning of life and violence is the end of life, and those unknowns are fascinating to us.

In *Grendel* we always try to portray violence as, we never tried to justify the violence, even in instances where it seemed justified, it always led to some fairly hideous consequences eventually. Violence only begets more violence. I'm a pretty extreme liberal politically you know, I was thinking the other day all these justification for war that circle around our society nowadays, and I thought "You know isn't our government and our status as a nation supposed to reflect our personas as individuals, our collective personas as individuals?" And in no way do we OK two people to go strap on armor and knives and swords and have at each other as a way of dealing with problems. Why is that our immediate response to the way certain problems address us as a society that we need to go toward war to work them out? So I find that all very strange and very irreconcilable.

And so even some of my more heroic of *Grendel* characters like Christine, you know Christine is trying straight to avenge the loss of her son. Well everybody understands that anger and that fear that hideous loss, and yet it consumes her. In the ninth issue, our kind of infamously silent issue, where there's a kind of brutal cop that's been circling the whole case and kind of intrudes a little too far for her tastes, and she spends the whole issue tracking, terrorizing, and ultimately murdering him. At the end of the issue before it, when she goes and gets the Grendel fork and the Grendel costume and is going to go after him, you as the reader very much feel like "Yeah! Go get that bastard!" And by the end of the ninth issue you don't feel that way, you feel like "Wow, she has stepped over the edge and she is insane. This has consumed her." And in fact that was a famous issue because it was all silent. I had one caption, the first half which was on the first page, the last half of which was on the last page, and it said, first caption, "And as to the case of Dominic Reilly" which is the name of the cop. Then you go through this whole issue of her silently stalking him, terrorizing him, she cuts off his fingers, she stabs him, she's brutal. The final caption is "Eventually I killed him." And that's just such a punctuation that takes you around the corner from where you expected to be.



Mage: The Hero Defined #2

And similarly in the stories of *War Child.* Grendel Prime seems to be leading, for all intents and purposes, a fairly heroic quest. Yet at the same time, you know, your constantly reminded he's just a giant killing machine, that's what he does. He's trained to kill, he kills, kills a lot, kills often, kills relentlessly, kills remorselessly. So we really try and keep that moral conundrum open all the time in *Grendel* because, granted there are times when we root for the bad guys to get killed, and I just think that rooting for killing is just never the way to go. I remember having an argument one time with my wife before we had kids with a cousin of hers who had kids, and we were arguing about some of these people that do these execution vigils outside of prison, and they show up and they hold signs and they wait for the execution and they cheer. And she was like "Look, I have kids, I understand, it's like f**k that asshole!" And my attitude was "No you should not cheer that." Having to put somebody to death for that, and I'm not pro-death penalty, but let's just leave that argument aside, but having to put to somebody to death for a crime, that they can't fit into society anymore, is not a cause for celebration or victory, it's a cause to turn our faces away in shame. This is one of our greatest failures as a society. It's not a victory.

And so all those considerations I try to keep at the forefront of every *Grendel* tale. At the same time I've got to confess all this stuff's lurid and fascinating and there's a voyeuristic thrill to it. So I guess I'm constantly walking a tightrope between those two attitudes.

RD: Well that's where you're working on those two levels, the superficial level and the deeper meaning.

MW: Exactly, exactly. And that's the fun for me, operating on two levels like that you know? I don't tell very obvious tales. I guess that's why, you know when you mentioned earlier about the resonance my stories have, it's because you know you get a thrill out of it to begin with, and then when you're sitting at home later you think "Wait a minute! That wasn't quite the way I thought it was, was it?"

RD: Yeah it hits you. That's the one thing I'm really fascinated with, the idea that we often have to face up to our failures and how that then defines us and helps us learn.

MW: And facing up to your failures is, I think, a good thing. Artistically it's a good thing you know? You got to go through, you know, there's an old saying, I think Dave Sim had this analogy, everybody has a hundred pages of shitty comic book art they gotta crap out before they get to any good stuff. And you know that's putting it in terms of comic books, but it's also the same in any sort of art class you know? You produce a lot of really mediocre crap before you hit that one that really looks like what you want it to look like, and you need to be bold enough to walk into your failures and come out the other side and grow and mature and benefit from the realization of those failures. They make you stronger. People that don't learn from their failures do repeat themselves constantly, you know the old Ben Franklin quote, the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing action over and over again expecting a different result every time.

The same is true of, again going back artistically you know, people that tend to draw stuff the same way over and over and over again, even though, you know I hate to use this term in regards to art, but even though it's wrong. You're just not getting that part right, man! Try it again! But yeah you have to be persistent. I spoke earlier about that storytelling demonstration that I do, people are so afraid of that first mark because they're so afraid of failure, that that first mark's gonna be a failure. First mark on the blank page. Well how could it be? You could put a thousand marks all over that page and you could still cough something out of it that would look OK. I remember one time I went into a drawing class and [the instructor] he said "Today we're not allowed to use any recognizable tools." So you couldn't use a pencil, pen, a paintbrush, you had to find something in the room and use it as your tool. I forget what I ended up using but it was something soppy, I think it was a hunk of like rag that I had found that I dipped in the ink and was just like sworping that around and it looked...pretty good!

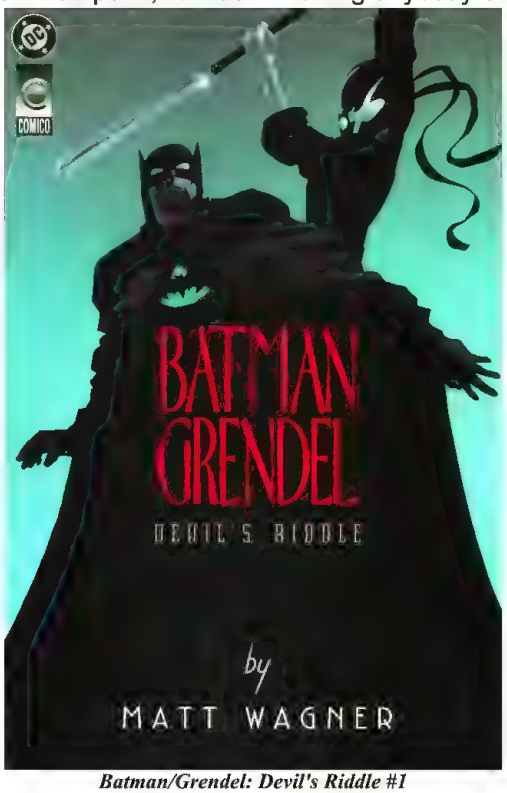
And you know that's ultimately the lesson of Kevin Matchstick as well, he's so convinced that it's a bat, and it's like Wally tells him "A bat? A bat's a brutal cudgel." It's a clubbing device. There's nothing sophisticated about a bat. There's nothing elegant about a bat. You can do a lot better than that. (Laughter) The tool doesn't matter.

RD: You'll have to find something else.

MW: And there's plenty to be had, exactly. So you don't limit yourself in that regard and that's a very liberating aspect about art as well.

Batman/Grendel

The entire team up of *Batman* with *Grendel* came about as a result of the fact that the two big companies could no longer deny the existence and the power of the uprising of the independent comics publishing world. It just became evident that sooner or later that the two worlds were going to have to meet and east was east and west was west never the twain shall meet, well the twain should meet right? So actually the idea was very unusual for me because normally everything I do is kind of self generated. It's an idea that springs from me and I take it to whoever's publishing my stuff or I take it to DC and say hey I have an ideal let's run with this, but in this case it was these two publishers concocting an idea that they should have some crossover between *Batman*, who was the hottest character around at that point, and *Grendel* was, and I think probably wasn't Comico's biggest selling title at that point, it was high up there, but it was Comic's most creatively respected title.



Batman/Grendel: Devil's Riddle #1

So they approached me and boy I went through a lot of - I didn't have my normal calm elan when approaching all this. (Laughter) I was confronted with this opportunity to team up my character with *Batman*, and nobody had had that opportunity before. So I kind of over thought it all and froze up here and there, again I'm not used to that at all, I'm very good at ideation and carrying it through to fruition, and so the initial storyline was much more convoluted, and because the Christine's Spar storyline had just kind of wrapped up at Comico, in the initial *Batman/Grendel* crossover pitch it was a female *Grendel*, not Hunter Rose. In fact Grendel was a fictional entity in Batman's world, and this woman became obsessed with Grendel and adopted the character of Grendel and it was just bloated and overwrought and over thought. Finally it was Diana Schutz, my long time *Grendel* editor first at Comico and eventually later at Dark Horse and ever since, who said to me "Oh you're thinking about this too much! Just make it Hunter Rose, he's just like Bruce Wayne!"

I don't know why that never struck me before (Laughter) but I just thought "Damn! She's right!" and as soon as she said that I came up with the first scene in the book where they just happen to run into each other at the Gotham Men's Club and they're both exactly the same and exactly opposite you know? So that's how that all came about. And predictably the legal finaglings of striking that deal took a long time, but they gave me plenty of time to really work through what became a very complex story line. You know if you look at most of the other crossovers DC has done with independently owned characters, they tend to be pretty slam bang action affairs that just kind of breeze in and breeze out. The *Grendel/Batman* story line was, again, consequential and psychologically ripe and delved into the emotional realities that just aren't addressed in normal cross company publishing events. Go figure.

RD: Well that's what gave it its uniqueness.

MW: Yeah, yeah and Bruce Wayne and Hunter Rose are mirror aspects of each other and they both exist in a violent world, the difference is Hunter Rose is violent because he can be. Batman is violent because he has to be. Hunter Rose finds absolute fulfillment in the exercise of his violence. Batman, which is nothing more than that he didn't have to do that violence, you know? Batman is not a psychopath, Batman doesn't delight in beating up the bad guy, Batman wishes he didn't have to.

RD: Batman is a creature of necessity.

MW: Batman is a creature of necessity. He also is not, I never took to this idea that he's punishing the bad guy, he's not punishing the bad guy, he's stopping the bad guy from hurting anybody else. When I say that violence arises, both violence and sex trigger our voyeuristic aspects, the reason is they both involve change. You're not fascinated by watching people walking on the street getting on the subway because that happens so often every day. We're fascinated by change. Think of a thunderstorm, when a thunderstorm rolls in that's different, people stop and stare up into the sky. Same way when somebody lands a punch on somebody, it just doesn't happen all the time and you stop and "Huh?" as to what's going on. Even raised voices cause you to stop and turn your head. Similarly the changes a person goes through in the midst of sexual excitement. They're behaving well out of the way they normally behave. And all that is just intriguing because it's change and change is something that is a fascinating human kind because we can perceive of change.

So many aspects of our life are seeking to escape our ordinariness. I read a book by Aldous Huxley, the author of *Brave New World*, where he had a whole bit of appendices in the back where he talked about transcendence, and according to him mankind's true goal is transcendence, and to transcend our normal everyday lives, to transcend our physical realities, to transcend our mental limitations. And people go about that in a zillion different ways. They go about it through religion, through prayer, through sex, through drugs, through thrills, through dancing, through art, through music, through so many different fashions, so many exciting and powerful fashions, but it all has the same goal: to elevate us beyond the gravity of ordinary life.

RD: Then when you factor in the human connections that play into that, particularly with sex and violence.

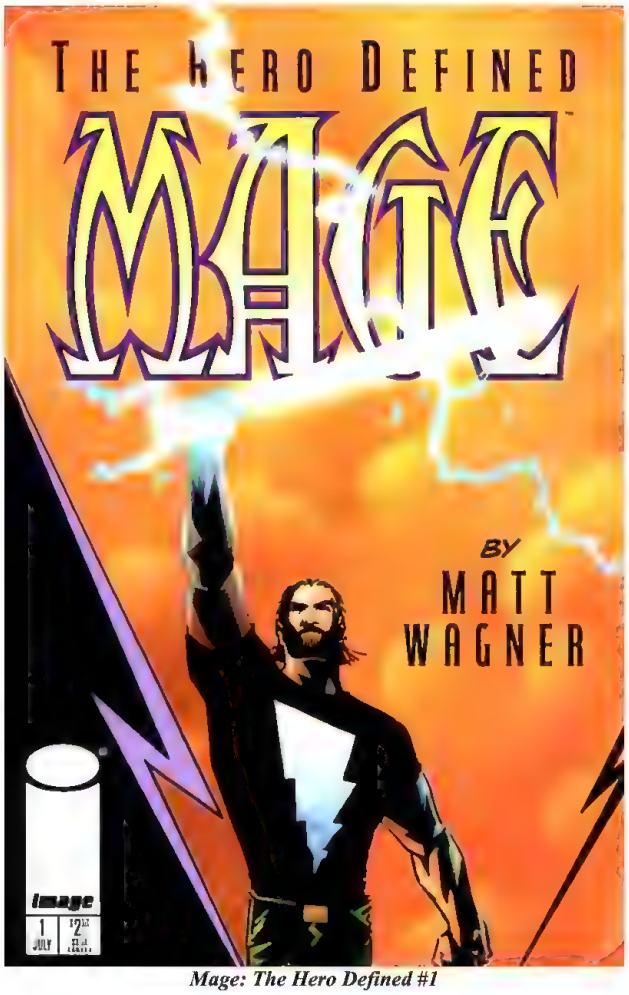
MW: Oh sure! Yeah.

RD: There's a very up close and personal aspect to that.

MW: Yeah. Yeah because those aspects of change and those aspects of transcendence usually spill over onto somebody else as well. You don't just sit around and enjoy a piece of violence the way you enjoy a piece of music! (Laughter) But consequence matters to us, and we feel it, and we want to experience it, and we want to experience it voyeuristically because when we experience it voyeuristically we don't have a dog in the fight. We don't have any skin on the ground. "Look at that guy, he got the shit kicked out of him! Glad it wasn't me." (Laughter) Similarly when you watch porn it's like, you know, look at them go at it. You know they're f**king in a much more extraordinary fashion than I ever have! It's the same thing you know?

I don't want to make it sound like I'm just so damned serious about everything I do you know? A lot of it for me is fun, just sheer fun, I do stuff for fun but again, I have such a firm belief in these Yungian Archetypes and the fact that these things in the way we address the world around us has a certain seriousness. I've just never had a certain frivolity to the way I approach things. That's not to say I don't have fun at it, I do. But you know, you see some of these creators and all they want to draw is big guns and big tits, and that's never really appealed to me. Even though, you know, I understand the appeal of big guns and big tits, but it's kind of a dead end in and of itself. I don't think I have ever approached any of this with any sort of grand scheme. When people interviewed me about *Grendel* they want me to have had it all worked out from the beginning. I don't. I didn't.

You know part of the joys of art is being presented with a big mess and you had to make some sense out of it. That has always been my case with *Grendel.* Always at the end of a storyline I'm always presented with a certain limiting variety of factors and an unlimited road ahead, and then how do I guide it on to the next stages of the road. I've always had an interest in philosophy, and religious thought, and the way we interact, and the way mankind behaves, and our connection to the eternal and the mundane. It tends to be instinctual. It tends to be tense. It tends to be archetypical. The archetypes of stuff that is hard wired into our into our souls. And I guess I just have gotten good at letting that aspect of my soul roam free, you know, and capturing what it experiences and putting it down on paper. That's myth making. When you can take the archetypical and voice it in the common tongue you know? If you look at it in any sort of an ancient societal structure I'm sure the priests inside the temple had one way of talking amongst themselves, but when they went out and talked to the populace, they had to put it in terms that the populace would understand and would evocative and resonant to the populace.



Mage: The Hero Defined #1

RD: Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables all the time?

MW: Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables all the time? Exactly. Exactly. He was not telling you the truth, He was illustrating the truth. Similarly when you read my work you don't hear any of this shit we've just been talking about do ya, you know? It's there but you gotta dig for it. It's voiced in a way that's accessible, that has, again I keep coming back to the term resonant, that has a voice that echoes beyond the immediate reading. You know my favorite artists are pop songwriters. I love the Beatles obviously I've mentioned them several times here, but you know I'm a giant Elvis Costello fan. Same thing you know, he writes these songs that just seem to be poignant little love songs and so many regards and sometimes they have a little anger and a little vitriol in them, and then later when you think about them you realize how much deeper they are than initially thought on first listening.

Art and music and religion and philosophy. Different words for the same meal, you know? It's all stuff that fortifies our spirits as human beings. It's all things that questions our appetites as human beings. I'm a cook too by the way, I keep using these food metaphors. (Laughter) It's all things that reinforce us as human beings, as creatures within the world and also as the unique creatures we are within the world. On one level we are common animals, on another level we're the only animals that have transformed the world in the way that we have.

RD: Matt, thank you for being with us today, it's been a fascinating and spiritually enlightening discussion.

MW: (Laughter) Well I hope I wasn't too heavy! I like to keep things fun and entertaining to!

RD: Very much so, very much so. Thank you for being with us.

MW: My pleasure!

This interview is taken from the video interview conducted with Matt and can be found on Creator Chronicles: The Interviews 2007-2014, available on Bluray and a limited-edition signed DVD. For more information or to order this Bluray, please visit http://www.amdalemedia.com/ccvideo.shtml.

Two Decades of Comic Book Movies Part 5

The Future

The rise of comic books as a popular form of art and entertainment ran in parallel to Hollywood, particularly since the 1930s, so it was inevitable that at some point they would cross paths. As we have seen over the years, these interactions would take some time to achieve and come in fits and starts. Hollywood has a long history of adapting works from other mediums, with mixed success, but comics presented some unique challenges compared to books or other media. Numerous technical challenges in realizing such fantastical characters and stories, along with the associated cost and perception of comics as "kids" stuff, kept comic book movies off the screen for decades.

Superman Lives!

In the previous four parts of this series, we have taken a look at the progression of comic book movies, with a particular focus on the last two decades, roughly from Blade to the present. This time period represents a significant ramp-up in comic book movies, a concerted effort to increase the quality and quantity of on-screen super heroes and do them right.

In this concluding article, we will catch up with the *Superman* movies and also take a speculative look at the roadmaps of Marvel and DC for the next several years.

Superman IV in 1987 was an epic bomb of a movie. It was so bad that there was little effort to bring the Man of Steel back to the big screen for many years. Much of that was redeemed by the first *Batman* movie in 1989, and steady improvements continued until comic book movies started to hit their stride in the early 21st century. While many movie efforts benefited from this upward trajectory, the *Superman* films languished in development hell for nearly 20 years. In fact, there were 4 *Batman* movies, 3 *Blade*, 3 *X-Men*, 2 *Spider-Man* - and that is all just within superhero franchises - that came out between Superman IV and the next movie.

Not that attempts were not made at all in this time. Indeed the long and convoluted path to getting a new Superman movie is a book in itself. The shorter version is after many delays the first major attempt actually got into pre-production in 1997 with Nicolas Cage in the title role, Tim Burton as director, and based on a script written by Kevin Smith and reworked by Wesley Strick, hopes were high that an updated 90s version of Superman would fly. Roughly based on the *Death of Superman* storyline in the comics, the movie would have featured Brainiac blocking out the sun and siccing Doomsday on Metropolis to take on Superman, with the expected outcome of both dying and Superman enduring some kind of resurrection.

Back in Action (Superman Returns)

Had *Superman Lives* actually been made with Nic Cage as Superman and the proposed radical changes to Clark's ancestry and relationship to Lex Luthor, it would have undoubtedly been one of the most divisive and potentially alienating comic book movies ever. On the other hand, it would have been a spectacle

and could have broadened the brand and market by pulling in the many people who bought the *Death of Superman* comics, which made a big splash in the mainstream in 1992.

The excellent documentary *The Death of "Superman Lives": What Happened?* (2015) is a must-see for anyone wanting to know the fascinating history of this doomed project. The documentary is packed with video footage of Nic Cage as Superman, both in and out of costume, taken from many pre-production tests, along with behind the scenes footage of the development of the costume. It lays out the full story of one of the most titanic failures to launch in Hollywood history.

Zod confronts Jor-El (Man of Steel)

That next actual movie in the franchise would begin a trend of Superman movies that would be extremely well made from a production and technical perspective, but receive a mixed reception from a creative and character standpoint. ***Superman Returns*** (2006) would be a love-letter to the original Richard Donner films, taking place as a direct sequel to *Superman II* and ignoring the events of *Superman III* and *IV*. Not only did it continue story elements, it even used the same core music and a remarkable Christopher Reeve look and sound-alike in Brandon Routh. Routh is wonderful as Superman, when he is given scenes and dialogue befitting the original super hero. This Superman is cut from the same basic cloth as the earlier era movie Man of Steel and, except for one glaring instance where he turns into a peeping tom, is the thoughtful, kind, self sacrificing hero with a touch of humility and humanity that we have grown to love in the comics and movies.

Superman has left earth to try to find out what happened to his home planet of Krypton. In the wake of his disappearance, the world has gone on and some have come to question the need for a Superman in the world. One of those people is Lois Lane (the excellent Kate Bosworth but about a decade before she would have been perfect for the role) who penned a Pulitzer Prize winning article on the subject. She now has a son(!) and is involved with a stable, boring pilot whom she can never quite get around to marrying. When Superman does return, it is in one of the most spectacular super hero rescues ever put on film. A new shuttle is to be test launched from the back of a 747 directly at high altitude. The release mechanism jams, but the auto-start sequence has initiated and can't be aborted. The shuttle engines fire, taking the 747 with it to the stratosphere. Superman to the rescue! And what a rescue it is, It would be the excitement high point of the movie, though the yacht rescue in the ocean deserves a nod for it's impressive sense of scale.

Learning to Fly (Man of Steel)

The return of Superman occurs coincidently with the return of Lex Luthor, this time played by Kevin Spacey, who really dials up the crazy but never quite manages to equal the deep menace of Gene Hackman's version. His latest evil plot is…another real estate scheme, only this one involves using the remnants of Krypton's advanced crystal technology to grow a new continent in the middle of the Atlantic. He has to modify his plans due to the return of Superman by adding Kryptonite to the mix, creating an entire continent poisonous to Superman. It would be a brilliant plan if he hadn't already tried similar schemes in nearly every other Superman movie before. A bit of a let down, *Superman Returns* had the misfortune of being highly anticipated and scrutinized, a trend for Superman films that would continue to the present day.

What all of the wheel-spinning for two decades produced was mostly a significantly depleted bank account. By the time *Superman Returns* got made, all the production costs of the previous attempts were rolled into its budget, which itself was north of $200 million, bloating the cost to over $260 million. And that was before a $100 million marketing campaign, pushing the total to nearly $400 million. With astronomical costs like that, expectations were low, but hopeful, for recouping. Surprisingly the movie did very well, particularly worldwide, and made back all the money spent. It was still considered something of a disappointment because it didn't *make* any money and while reviews were mostly positive, it was not a runaway hit. A sequel was planned for 2009, but was scrapped when the box office didn't meet the desired level.

One of the most polarizing comic book movies in history, ***Man of Steel*** (2013) takes a very different, and darker, take on the classic character. Helmed by Zach Snyder, who also directed another divisive comic book movie in *Watchmen*, and with significant input from Chris Nolan of the recent Batman movies, *Man of Steel* differs from previous depictions of Superman in some ways, yet still retains many of the core elements of the character and his universe.

One of the most significant of these elements is the overt science fiction aspect of the story. The entire movie is essentially a giant alien invasion piece with one man caught between two worlds. Given his alien nature, he has powers and abilities, but is otherwise a man who has to choose to defend his new home or embrace his heritage. The story otherwise follows the key points of the origin story, though it spends quite a bit of time at the beginning on Krypton setting up the conflicts and characters.

The themes of the movie are more serious this time around, and turn around the ideas of identity, Clark's place in the world, and the acceptance of a greater responsibility to the world. How Superman is perceived, how or even if he is accepted, weighs on Clark's mind and drives his decisions. It strives for a literate, mature approach and largely achieves it but at some expense of the more joyous and positive aspects of the character.

The Controversial Scene (Man of Steel)

The acting by all is first rate with some nice performances for a big comic action movie. Jor-El, played with sincerity and resolve by Russell Crowe, is given a much expanded role in *Man of Steel* appearing as a hologram throughout to guide Kal on his journey of self-discovery. Michael Shannon plays General Zod razor straight, with a fearsome commitment to all things Krypton. He invades Earth to retrieve The Codex, the sum of all knowledge of Krypton, which has been embedded in Clark's genome, and is willing to sacrifice all human life to accomplish this. Faora, Zod's second in command, is played by Antje Traue and she brings a truly otherworldly viewpoint to her character. Dangerous and faithful to the cause, she is all sleek lines and unrestrained lethality. Kevin Costner as Jonathan Kent was a waste of a good actor in a key role due almost entirely to his unneeded sacrifice to protect Clark's powers. The women in *Man of Steel* play a significant part of Clark's life. Diane Lane is fierce and feisty as Martha Kent, while Amy Adams as Lois Lane is plucky and dogged in her search for the mysterious man who helps strangers.

DC has always had their strongest casting with the Superman character, picking people that are relative unknowns but who embody the character in a way that you can't imagine many others could be as good in the role. Henry Cavill from The Tudors has all the right qualities for Superman. Capable of a range of emotions, Cavill imbues Clark with all the right midwestern values, right down to an accent that is pure middle America, which is fun to hear considering Cavill is British. It's just too bad he isn't give more chance to let his personality and ability shine through this somber take on the character.

The Big Gamble (Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice)

And then we get to "The" scene. The controversial final confrontation scene with Zod that ends with Superman taking Zod's life by breaking his neck. It's a shocking scene, and one that is hard to get over for those who grew up with the Boy Scout version of Superman. Even more than the tone and darker take on the character, this one scene has provoked the strongest, and most negative, response. It seems out of character, until you realize a few particular things about this more contemporary, updated Superman.

This is not the Superman who is mature in his power and character. He is very new to being a "representative" of anything, let alone an entire race and/or a symbol to the people of Earth. He is green and it shows in his lack of experience in dealing with his enormous power. He is just a man at heart who is trying to find his place in the world, and decide what he stands for. Killing Zod fills him with immediate regret and pushes him on a path to a greater understanding of what his values are and how what they will shape him into.

The finale, which goes on and on in a glorious orgy of destruction, lays waste to Metropolis on a grand scale. Many have taken the movie to task for this, given the excesses of the destruction and the seemingly indifference of Superman to the chaos he has wrought. This was not an oversight on the part of the filmmakers nor is Clark flippant about it. These issues were wisely held back for the sequel to deal with so that it can more fully address all the ramifications of a super powered alien living among humans getting the Earth involved in a confrontation with the remnants of his homeworld.

While the movie split fans and critics, it was a box office success, earning just over $668 million worldwide. Zach Snyder was to return as director of the sequel as well as writer David Goyer. At first it seemed this would be *Man of Steel 2*, but in light of the significant ramping up of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in the wake of *Avengers*, a radically different path was chosen. The sequel would be not only turned into a Batman Vs. Superman movie, but it would form the underpinnings of the sudden decision to craft a DC cinematic shared universe as well. Though "craft" might not be an accurate assessment. "Ill informed" may ultimately be the term used if this seemingly snap decision doesn't pan out.

The decision to go this direction was so impulsive and out of the blue that the wisdom of taking such a radical step and retrofitting and existing in-production movie is still being debated right up to the release of the sequel, now including Batman, Wonder Woman and several other DC heroes and re-titled *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Many are hopeful that DC can start making good super hero movies that aren't Batman, but there are many skeptics as well. Partially this skepticism is driven by the rushed DC CU elements, and partially by the significant difference in approach and direction of the proposed movies.

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016) was delayed for over a year from its original release, and even then delayed from the beginning of March to the end, to accommodate the attempt to integrate and initiate other DC films within the same universe. *BvS* is one of the most hotly anticipated films in movie history, even after several other high-profile comic movies, and bears the weight of several movie franchises hanging on its success or failure. The wisdom of incorporating Batman as an adversary remains to be seen, but the idea has a long history in comics and animation, and this is the first time DC has truly crossed over characters from one movie franchise to another. That it would take most of its conflict points from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, particularly issue #4, only added fuel to the fire. Fans were finally going to get a Superman/Batman team up on the big screen.

The Best Batman Yet? (Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice)

Following directly from the events of *Man of Steel*, *BvS* takes up with the destruction of Metropolis from the point of view of Bruce Wayne, played with an eye-opening credibility by Ben Affleck. Driven, intense beyond any other incarnation, Wayne is paranoid and terrified of the destructive potential that Superman brings to the table. His concern for the lives that could be lost should Superman prove to be less than honorable pushes him to turn his considerable fortune and talents as Batman to the problem of stopping – permanently – the threat Superman poses to the world.

Into this mix is thrown Lex Luthor who is the main, but not only, villain to confront the heroes. His latest scheme is…another real estate swindle! Just kidding. Actually this time around he is played by Jesse Eisenberg in a role that is way too weird and derivative for a movie this serious in tone. Eisenberg's Luthor, despite his twitchy and manic idiosyncrasies, is given a more subtle and manipulative role to play where he works behind the scenes to bring the two heroes into conflict. He is an arrogant little twit, and comes across as more annoying than dangerous, until he reconstitutes the body of Zod into the monstrous death machine Doomsday. From there, the finale ramps up the action sufficiently to justify the title of the movie, and with Wonder Woman thrown into the mix, functions as a proto-Justice League tryout. This portion of the movie works very well and it is a hoot to see them all in action together.

The DC Trinity (Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice)

The real treasure here is Ben Affleck's Batman and Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman. Both have real presence on screen and deliver on what had become hyped, controversial casting choices. Then again, when hasn't a Batman casting choice not been controversial? Affleck inhabits the role fully, and should put the naysayers to rest. Indeed, much of the praise of the film is directed at Affleck and Gadot. Gadot is used sparingly in the film, with her appearances brief and sprinkled throughout, at least until the finale where, in full Wonder Woman mode, she more than holds her own with the boys. People have been waiting over 75 years to see Wonder Woman on the big screen, and she does not disappoint.

Unfortunately, most of the rest of the cast isn't really given much to do but spout standard comic book and action movie dialogue, the cinematic equivalent of being "present" in class. The writing is sub-par, likely owing to the rushed nature of the production and the aforementioned desire on DC's part to add additional references to other heroes. The direction is fine in the action sequences, which is Snyder's strength, but lacks in iconic imagery and majesty that should accompany a giant team-up movie such as this. *Man of Steel* had these shortcomings as well, but that movie benefited from very low expectations. This movie is a dark and serious drama, but unfortunately doesn't develop its story and underlying themes sufficiently or smartly enough to compete with the likes of a *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. *BvS* is not the World's Finest titanic clash of champions we were hoping for. It's just OK.

The movie comes overstuffed with elements jammed in to let it also function as a jump-start for a Justice League movie due out next year. With so many different components to accommodate, the movie jumps around and never really settles into a cohesive narrative that would be so necessary to tell a compelling story considering the themes this one starts and then never follows through on satisfactorily. Indeed, story even seems to take a back seat to the demands of reducing entire sections to just plot points at times, rendering the movie more inert than it should be. The pace is measured to the point of plodding until the last act, and while this works better in a Batman film, here it just bogs down a movie that should be all about confrontation and conflict. It lacks the inspirational and heroic characters we all want to see until the final fight with Doomsday, and when the heroes work together we finally feel like cheering the movie on, but it is too little too late.

In the end, it unfortunately comes down to "what could have been" had the focus been more specific to Batman and Superman (and Wonder Woman, because she is so great in this) and their dynamic and ultimate showdown with Doomsday and Luthor. In a nutshell, it's a bit of a mess that is fun to watch at times, but is

ultimately a bit of a let down. It's too bleak and full of self-importance trying to be epic. It is even more distressing to consider that they are probably gearing the eventual Justice League movies to be a showdown with Darkseid, which would very nearly complete the riding of the coattails of Marvel's CU and the Avengers movies right down to a 'T'.

Smell The Love! (Deadpool)

By taking its tonal cues from the recent Batman movies, and only that, the DC movie universe is bucking the current trend set by Marvel of universally crowd-pleasing comic book movies. Maybe this is a bid to differentiate themselves from Marvel, or maybe they just want to avoid some of the mistakes of their own past? While there is some humor in modern DC movies, and it is mostly the right kind of humor that grows out of the characters and situation, there is also a strong avoidance of anything that could be construed as camp or silliness. They lack the casual repartee and camaraderie that is so much a part of the appeal and success of the Marvel movies. This is somewhat understandable given the historical track record of DC movie franchises starting out strong and getting goofier and dumbed-down in later films. DC fares much better at the more humorous and soap opera side of this on TV, where they are more open to experimenting with a wider range of tones and styles.

Reception to the movie so far seems very divided. The audience is split between those who want the smiling Boy Scout happier version of Superman, and those who like the more modern, contemporary take. It is a reflection of the times in many ways, as the world seems to be spinning out of control and the fears of threats of various kinds from within and without pull the attention of the populace to a darker, more sober outlook. So contentious is the dark, serious elements of *BvS* that Warner's is spending over $10 million to reshoot and add scenes to the upcoming *Suicide Squad* movie just to add humor and lighten the tone. How successful they will be with this approach is uncertain, but like with all things it will largely depend on how good the movies are to begin with. It remains to be seen if this approach will work long term for a character like Superman.

What a Surprise! It's a Hit! (Deadpool)

None of this seems to have affected the box office of the movie however. Released on March 25, 2016, *BvS* set many box office records including biggest pre-summer domestic weekend gross at $166 million (of any movie) and the biggest worldwide opening for any comic book movie in history at $420 million. These huge numbers point to a rosy future for the movie, but the reality is due to the huge production and marketing costs, it will need to make north of a billion dollars to be seen as a success. The dice rolls are getting larger with more riding on the outcome than ever before, though with this being the biggest opening weekend ever for Warner Bros., this is one bet that appears to have paid off.

The danger DC finds itself in is in the apparent rush to compete with Marvel by shoehorning the movies into a shared cinematic universe. Whereas Marvel did their "pilot" movies with *Iron Man* and *Hulk*, then took a couple of years to assess and flesh out the logistics of connected movies, even then the pace of new movies was only about 2 per year until things were solidly in hand. The rushed nature of DC's decision smacks of a desperation move, and one is not quite sure what the rush is here. To be sure, Marvel has a several year lead, but they are also pacing many movies out over the next 5 years. There doesn't seem to be any reason DC could not have taken a few years to build and plan, and even if they spilled past the 2020 timeframe, that might work to their advantage if the output of Marvel movies were to slow, DC could ramp up at that time. Perhaps they feel the need to strike while the iron is hot, or show that they can compete with Marvel at the game DC mostly started. Who knows? They certainly are giving it their all.

Before we take a look into the future and the multitude of proposed movies coming out in the next few years, let's take a short break for word from our sponsor.

Comic book movies got you down? Too serious, too dark, too dramatic? Do you feel that the Disney/Marvel Studios movies are too family-friendly, and the DC movies are too dark and moody? Well we have the cure for you! ***Deadpool*** (2016) runs that right over, throws a few vulgar insults at it, runs it over again, then urinates on it for good measure. *Deadpool* is a Fox movie, part of their deal with having the *X-Men* movie license that they are never going to relinquish unless they have to. After a (mostly) successful series of *X-Men* and *Wolverine* movies, and after a notorious leak of test footage in 2014, Fox decided to move forward with a *Deadpool* movie due in large part to the grass roots efforts of the filmmakers and a great outcry from fans. Tackling a character like Deadpool would daunt anyone, and Fox's track record on getting characters right is only so-so. See the *Fantastic Four* movies if any convincing is needed.

The story is pretty standard fare for a super hero (or anti-hero) origin movie: character is subjected to experiments to rid him of cancer and in the process is used as an experimental guinea pig. Scarred physically over his entire body and unhinged mentally from the procedure, not-good-but-not-actually-evil (and not a hero!) mercenary Wade Wilson (Ryan Reynolds) discovers he has gained some amazing powers, making him a virtually immortal self-healing killing machine. Thus motivated, he sets out to revenge himself upon the dastardly villain who did this to him, Francis. Francis, the psycho doctor. Re-branding himself as Ajax in a bid to be taken seriously and played with a suave and sincere menace by Ed Skrein, Francis sets out to recapture the escaped Wade Wilson with extreme prejudice.

Cue The Music (Deadpool)

Along the way Wade wrestles with revealing his survival to his fiance Vanessa (Morena Baccarin, luminous and strong) whom he left shortly after being diagnosed with cancer to spare her from the physical damage he will endure. The irony of his reason for leaving and then not returning being the same are not lost on the audience, and this conflict gives Reynolds and Baccarin something to work with besides sarcastic jokes. Their relationship is non-traditional (way non-traditional) but their feelings for each other are genuine and portrayed vividly.

There is also something about genetically triggering latent mutation in people and selling them as weapons to foreign warmongers, but that's just background plot in a movie that runs on story and character relationships, so it only comes up a few times briefly to remind us there is some semblance of motivation to the evil bad guy besides sadistic torture. And that's pretty much it. No saving the world, no introspective journey of finding a place in life, just a simple, straightforward, but reasonably fleshed out, twisted love-slash-revenge story. Emphasis on the slash.

True, Twisted Love (Deadpool)

The effects are top notch as well, even though *Deadpool* makes several cracks directly to the audience about how the movie couldn't afford this or that effect or character appearance. The entire $1.98 (*not the actual cost. Actually a modest $58 million, which is 2/3 of what the first X-Men movie cost almost 20 years ago) budget is up on the screen, and it looks fantastic. The level of graphic violence isn't as pervasive as is being made out, though there are a few scenes that are pretty gruesome, but then again you can get away with a lot more with satire and over-the-top exaggeration. In another welcome trend, the choreography of the action is always clear, which is something often lacking in kinetic action movies that too often devolve into cacophony and bombast masquerading as dynamic direction.

What sets it apart is the tone and attitude the movie takes. Dropping like the cinematic equivalent of an F-Bomb, *Deadpool* represents the antithesis of everything comic book movies have been striving for decades to achieve: it's irreverent, silly, does not take itself seriously, breaks the fourth wall, is crude, vulgar and a thumb in the eye of the establishment. This makes *Deadpool* riotously unpredictable and pushes the boundries of comic book movies. With the gloves off and virtually no restrictions, the movie takes aim at common comic book tropes and setups and satirizes them to an absurd degree.

While not quite done to the extent of something like *The Mask*, *Deadpool* nonetheless has its own manic energy, thanks almost entirely to Ryan Reynolds, getting a second chance with the character he originated in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. In that film, Deadpool worked well until he was altered and had his mouth taken away. Yes, they actually thought muzzling the Merc with a Mouth, and the perfect actor to play him, was a winning strategy for that movie.

Reynolds breathes real life into a character that could have just been a one-note Punisher or Spawn knock-off, and imbues him with dimension, soul, and character. Plenty of character. Oodles of character. Layered with satire. And extra sarcasm on top. Reynolds is so perfectly in tune with Deadpool that you can't imagine anyone else doing it any better. He is this movie's Hugh Jackman, so to speak. There is a fine line when it comes to sarcasm and satire, and Reynolds knows just where that line needs to be with Deadpool to keep the character and the tone of the entire movie from slipping into the abyss of mean spirited nastiness and harsh cruelty that so many movies covering similar humor styles seem to fall into.

Ed Skrein does a good job in a role that could have easily been rote and clichéd. Ok, well, it *is* a cliché role – evil scientist cum biological arms dealer is a pretty common type of trope – but the actor is a cut above the norm with personality and wit. Likewise the ludicrously named Negasonic Teenage Warhead (Brianna Hildebrand) deadpans with millennial apathy and self absorbed indifference while Colossus (voiced by Stefan Kapcic) is all honest boy scout and earnest belief in the value of being a good guy hero. T. J. Miller, playing what amounts to Wade's best friend by default, even though he is constantly wagering on Wade dying in his bar's

gambling dead pool (get it?), gets some of the best non-Reynolds funny lines and delivers them almost as well. Gina Carano plays into type as Francis' enforcer Angel, who has been mutated to wield enormous strength. While having few lines, she makes her presence felt in the knock down drag out battle with Colossus in the film's climax.

Excess is the name of the game for *Deadpool*, and it is on display at every level, from the crazy action sequences, to the rapid-fire one-liners and relentless sex jokes. Humor is the hardest thing to pull off well, especially in a comic book movie, and *Deadpool* is a prime example of doing it right. From the credits on down, not all of the jokes are side-splitting, but every one is a chuckle at least (with several aimed squarely at Hugh Jackman and Wolverine) and there are about a bajillion (*an actual quantity) Easter eggs for comics fans to find throughout.

A Really Bad Day For Someone (Deadpool)

Usually this level of insanity won't work in a sustained way as it beats the audience up too much and becomes numbing, yet here in the capable hands of director Tim Miller and screenwriters Paul Wernick and Rhett Reese it flows so smoothly and so fast you don't get time to get overwhelmed by it. It's a neat trick to pull off, especially for a first time director. The filmmakers know when to pull back, take a breather, and let the audience catch up before the next round of mayhem. This is becoming a lost art in action movies in recent times, and it is refreshing to see less of a frenetic non-stop pace in an action movie. That being said, the Wade transformation sequences could have moved along a bit more, as it's the one part of the movie that feels bogged down.

As a result of the level of violence and action, and the overt vulgarity, it is being touted as the first "hard R" Marvel movie, even though there have been several "Rated R" Marvel movies before. Given the attention to craft and the obvious love that went into making it, as well as it being a riotously good time, *Deadpool* shattered many box office records for an R rated movie, earning $132 million in its four day opening weekend and grossing over $750 million worldwide as of this writing, making it the highest grossing rated R movie of all time. It will undoubtedly lead to not only sequels, but numerous knock-offs that are sure to be inferior and take only superficial lessons from the style of humor as well as shoot for all the graphic violence possible so they can be "like *Deadpool*."

Not Your Typical Super-Hero Team (Suicide Squad)

Deadpool is the anti-everything comic book movie that flings its anarchy in the teeth of "serious" comic book movies with gleeful abandon. Is it juvenile? Yes. Is it fun? Exceedingly so.

Now let's take a look at the near future of comic book movies. 2016 will represent the peak amount of comic book movies (so far). An incredible 8 comic book films are set to be released in a single year. The years following 2016 have anywhere from 5 to 7 movies currently scheduled, and more may be added depending on how aggressive DC might choose to be in ramping up their DC CU efforts. And this is only within the sphere of super hero movies. Other non super powered comic movies like *The Kingsman* could be added to the mix as more and more projects are greenlit to take advantage of the intense and now-mainstream interest in comic book movies.

Back over on the DC side, things are flying fast and furious with new announcements almost weekly. In their bold bid to "catch up" to Marvel, DC has set an aggressive schedule of movies starting with *Suicide Squad* in August, followed by an entire slate of movies until 2020. All of these movies were added to DC's schedule just in the last year, well after *BvS* was in production. All eyes are on *Suicide Squad*, which is getting a lot of attention and may be as nearly anticipated as *BvS* was. This is due in large part to the plum roles of Joker, played by a seriously whacked-out looking Jared Leto, and his onetime paramour Harley Quinn, played by Margot Robbie, who certainly looks to have the character nailed down.

The Suicide Squad is a collection of DC villains gathered and sent on a literal suicide mission. Should they somehow survive, clemency will be granted for their crimes. It is an anti-hero movie that promises to be as dark and gritty as current DC fare, but will likely also have a lot more humor in it. DC will apparently be expanding the DCU away from just gritty realism as *Suicide Squad* features straight-up magic with the Enchantress. Ben Affleck's Batman will also make an appearance, presumably as part of a chase and capture sequence of the Joker. A sequel is already green-lit for production to start in 2017.

Not too much is known about *Wonder Woman* (2017) yet, except that it takes place in 1918 during World War I and Steve Trevor is in it. Interest in the character is very high after her debut in *BvS*, and expectations are through the roof on her solo movie. With solid people at the helm and capable actors in the main roles, *Wonder Woman* is looking like the real thing.

In 2017 we also get *Justice League: Part 1* which is sure to pique the interest of a lot of people. Among DC's big group books you mainly have JSA, JLA, Teen Titans and Legion of Super Heroes. JSA isn't practical to do with the convoluted history of the golden age JSA being recreated in the silver age as the JLA, so JLA it is. This will likely be the make-or-break movie for DC, as a failure here could put the rest of the lineup in jeopardy.

Well, That Certainly Is...Different (Suicide Squad)

2018 will bring *The Flash* and *Aquaman*, 2019 will give us *Shazam*, *Justice League: Part 2*, 2020 brings Cyborg (or Teen Titans) and Green Lantern Corps. DC's production is so in flux that many of these details and even entire movies may change or not be made. Somewhere in all that are possible *Lobo*, *Legion of Super Heroes*, *Sandman*, and *Dark Universe* movies. There should also be a solo Batman (possibly written and directed by Ben Affleck himself) and maybe a Superman movie somewhere around 2018 or 2019.

One other major difference between Marvel and DC is that DC is keeping their TV and cinematic efforts strictly separate. No sharing of stories or actors between them. The Flash was "recast" essentially in *BvS* as they didn't use Grant Gustin from the TV show. DC has a tremendous well of characters and stories to draw from, so hopefully the aggressive production schedule will not result in sub-par, half-baked movies just for the sake of getting them out quickly.

Heading over to Marvel, their projected schedule has been pretty well hammered out for a year or so, so things are less chaotic and more set in stone. The only big recent change was a *Spider-Man* movie in 2019, due to a rights sharing agreement with Sony. This could also possibly happen with Fox with the *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four* movies (more likely the latter) so there may be other movies added in the coming years. So far, we have *Captain America: Civil War* in May, which will function as essentially Avengers 2.5 as it features the entire cast and then some. In November will come *Doctor Strange*, a statement many thought would never be made, with inspired casting choice Benedict Cumberbatch as the good doctor. *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* follows in 2017 along with *Spider-Man*, getting a seriously rushed production. *Thor: Ragnarok* rounds out a very busy 2017 for super hero movies, with as many as 7 films expected to be released.

2018 ushers in *Black Panther*, a big fan favorite who will be debuting and having a major impact in *Captain America: Civil War*. Also in 2018 will be *Avengers: Infinity War Part 1*, which will be the culmination of the Thanos subplot that has been running throughout most of the Marvel movies. This is followed by *Ant-Man and The Wasp* to finish off 2018. 2019 starts with *Avengers: Infinity War Part 2*, which will follow directly into the *Captain Marvel* movie, and then closing the year with *Inhumans*. 2020 is up for grabs, but Marvel has slated 3 movies for this year, so it is likely they will be something like *Spider-Man 2*, *Black Panther 2*, and so on depending on how well those movies do.

Can They Get Him Right Too? (Doctor Strange)

Marvel has been on a tear with their MCU movies, and so far none has been outright bad or a bomb. If they can maintain this quality and reception through 2020, it will represent an unprecedented run of popular movies within a single genre and studio and put them on a par with Pixar and their near-perfect track record.

There are many challenges in making good comic book movies. Adapting a comic involves adhering closely to the source material, but also being smart about when and how to deviate and adjust to make it work with live actors. Pacing, camera movement, dialogue all have to have some allowance for the differing medium. The key is to find the

heart of the original stories, and use that as a close guide to crafting a live moving picture. So far, most of the studio efforts in the last few years have been successful because they have finally figured this out. As long as the studios and creators can follow the solid path laid so far, the future of comic movies looks bright.

Avengers 2.5: Us v Them (Captain America: Civil War)

So that brings us to today, and the future. Comic book movies sure have come into their own, and vindicated legions of comic fans that always believed they could do great movies that would appeal beyond fandom. Comic movies now sit atop the A-List movie pyramid, with franchise after franchise being created and universes being built and expanded. Comic book movies now command devout attention from the mass movie going audience. It used to be that top line actors avoided starring in comic book movies, unless given some significant encouragement, like the $3 million paid to Marlon Brando for 6 days work on the first *Superman* movie. Now top actors are clamoring to land a plum comic character role.

Today comic book movies have become the top movie genre and are tentpole pictures. Where do comic movies go from here after the next few years are rolled out? Will comic book movies maintain their tentpole status and premiere movie going experiences, or will there be a backlash due to over-saturation and dilution? What is certain is that we have several years of a plethora of comic book movies to look forward to, and while they may not all be hits, it will be an interesting and entertaining spectacle to watch.

The Movie Everyone Is* Really *Waiting For (Wonder Woman)

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